

# The Rohingya Crisis: Impact and Consequences for South Asia

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## Abstract

*Inevitably, the Rohingya crisis will have an impact on the South-East Asian environment. But it would be simplistic to see this important Burmese internal issue as limited to South-East Asia. Geographically and historically, Myanmar has also been connected to another area: South Asia. Hence, what is happening to the Rohingya Muslim minority is also a political issue of particular importance for the subcontinent. This paper will analyse its impact on India, Pakistan and Bangladesh.*

**Key words:** India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Rohingya, Myanmar.

## Introduction

Since the end of August 2017, a long-term policy of ethnic cleansing in Myanmar has again turned violent against a minority in this country - the Rohingya people. Using the pretext of ‘terrorist attacks’ against the security forces by the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA) - Rohingya rebels,<sup>1</sup> the Burmese Army has targeted Rohingya civilians, burning villages, killing men, raping women, forcing a whole population to flee because of their identity, not their actions. Indeed, at the root of what is called the ‘Rohingya Crisis’ is a refusal to accept this population as a minority indigenous to Myanmar. They were stripped off their citizenship by law in 1982.

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<sup>1</sup> ICG, “Myanmar Tips into New Crisis after Rakhine State Attacks” (Brussels: International Crisis Group, 2017), <https://d2071andvip0wj.cloudfront.net/Myanmar%20statement%2027viii17.pdf>.

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For local nationalists, to be a citizen of Burma was strongly influenced by an ethnic (Bamar, the majority in the country) and religious (Buddhist) approach.<sup>2</sup> Rohingyas, from their point of view, are South Asians, Bengalis, brought to the country by the British coloniser. This simplistic approach, that the history of the Rakhine/Arakan territory and of its Muslim population are disconnected, has made Rohingyas non-state actors (NSAs) considered a danger to the nation, as a 'foreign', alien element. At the time this paper is written, one can already say that Burma has partly succeeded in its policy of violence and persecution: there are now an estimated 650,000 Rohingya Muslims in Bangladesh of the 1.1 million in Myanmar, with countless still fleeing.

This is a crisis of tremendous importance for South-East Asia. But the anti-Bengali undertone of the Rohingya crisis, and the impact of this population's latest escape, mainly to Bangladesh, is proof that this issue will also impact South Asia. After all, India and Bangladesh share borders with Myanmar. For humanitarian, political and geopolitical reasons, it is clear that Dhaka, New Delhi, and even Islamabad, will be affected by the crisis.

### **India and Bangladesh: Impact of a Troubled South-East Asian Neighbourhood**

India shares a 1,624 km border with Myanmar. It is the main connection between this South-East Asian country and South Asia. The other link between these two parts of Asia is the Myanmar-Bangladesh border (193 km). Because of these borders, the Rohingya crisis has a particular resonance for New Delhi and Dhaka. Besides, India being a prospective great power seeming to have an influence in its regional environment, and Bangladesh being an important refuge for Rohingya refugees, the said crisis can only be of particular importance for these two countries.

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<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Francis Wade, *Myanmar's Enemy Within: Buddhist Violence and the Making of a Muslim 'Other'* (London: Zed Books, 2017), Kindle.

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India sees itself as a prospective great power.<sup>3</sup> Such a claim, in the Twenty-First Century, requires difficult alchemy between traditional tools (hard power, international diplomatic influence, economic strength, etc.) and newer ones, more linked to soft power. Indeed, it appears that the international community expects from great powers, especially the newest ones, to be ‘responsible stakeholders.’<sup>4</sup> Even if the American and Russian policy choices did not make them appear as ‘responsible’, this is still something that is associated with great powers’ responsibility, in the name of international stability. But in reaction to the crisis in Burma, India has not really reacted as a ‘responsible stakeholder’ in regional stability.

Indeed, such a crisis should force a democratic ‘responsible stakeholder’ to intervene, on humanitarian grounds at least. But Prime Minister Modi made the choice to show his support for the Burmese Government instead during a three-day visit to Myanmar in early September 2017. He did not mention the Rohingyas’ persecution. He talked about helping to normalise the situation in the Rakhine State, where the crisis happened, through Indian support for development, as if the problem was only economic.<sup>5</sup>

Could India do otherwise? One might argue that Myanmar is India’s infrastructural gateway to South-East Asia. With a strong India-Myanmar relationship, the former could build a solid engagement with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).<sup>6</sup> Besides, New Delhi’s

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<sup>3</sup> Indeed, it cannot be seen as great power yet, despite its ambitions. See Usman Ghani and Khalid Chandio, “Indian Great Power Aspirations: An Analysis,” *IPRI Journal* XIII, no. 2 (2013): 112-120,

<http://www.ipripak.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/02/std2usms13.pdf>.

<sup>4</sup> For details, see articles in the English-speaking media about China’s role as a ‘responsible’ great power. Also, Yong Deng, “China: The Post-Responsible Power,” *The Washington Quarterly* 37, no. 4 (2015), 117-132, [http://www.iberchina.org/files/2016/post\\_responsible\\_power\\_china\\_yong\\_deng.pdf](http://www.iberchina.org/files/2016/post_responsible_power_china_yong_deng.pdf).

<sup>5</sup> “PM Modi tells Suu Kyi India is with Myanmar, but Skips Mention of Rohingya Issue,” *Hindustan Times*, September 6, 2017, <http://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/modi-in-myanmar-pm-praises-suu-kyi-s-leadership-vows-to-fight-terror-in-joint-statement/story-vC4Pi9WL594NnRt8Oe430J.html>.

<sup>6</sup> Jonathan Tai, “Why India isn’t Really ‘Acting East’ in Myanmar,” *Diplomat*, July 15, 2017, <https://thediplomat.com/2017/07/why-india-isnt-really-acting-east-in-myanmar/>.

policy is focused, first and foremost, on its perceived competition with China. To some extent, countering China's rise and influence in Asia seems to define best India's 'Act East' policy.<sup>7</sup> Beijing, too, has been careful in its reaction to the Rohingya crisis, just like the United States of America (USA) was at least at the beginning of the crisis: in September 2017, the State Department was very careful not to put any blame on the Burmese Government itself.<sup>8</sup> In fact, till the end of October 2017, a time when every serious analyst was at least discussing the ethnic cleansing of the Rohingyas, US diplomacy remained hesitant to use such a term.<sup>9</sup> It is clear that the desire to oppose Chinese influence in Myanmar dominates the US approach. India is following the same logic: geopolitics trumps human rights, as is often the case.

But is India's policy realistic and needed to protect the state's interests as some in New Delhi would want the international community to believe? Not necessarily. In fact, India's Government is making a mistake, first from a moral and political point of view. Indeed, by its refusal to criticise the Burmese policy of ethnic cleansing, at a time when the rest of South Asian countries do not hesitate to do so, it has lost the right to present itself as a natural defender of other minorities elsewhere.<sup>10</sup> In particular, it clearly unmasks Modi's hypocrisy when he claims to defend the Baloch people in Pakistan.<sup>11</sup>

More generally speaking, the loss of moral high ground in the Rohingya crisis shows an India more ideologically driven than realist in

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<sup>7</sup> For example, Gabrielle Dominguez, "From 'Look East' to 'Act East' – India Shifts Focus," interview, *Deutsche Welle*, December 19, 2014, <http://www.dw.com/en/from-look-east-to-act-east-india-shifts-focus/a-18141462>; Sudhanshu Tripathi, "Why India is Switching from a Look East to an Act East Policy," *Asia Times*, June 15, 2017, <http://www.atimes.com/india-switching-look-east-act-east-policy/>.

<sup>8</sup> Laura Koran and Jennifer Hansler, "US Stops Short of Admonishing Myanmar for Attacks on Rohingya," *CNN.com*, September 9, 2017, <http://edition.cnn.com/2017/09/08/politics/us-myanmar-rohingya/index.html>.

<sup>9</sup> Katherine Gypson, "US Weighs Pressuring Myanmar on Rohingya Crisis," *Voice of America*, October 27, 2017, <https://www.voanews.com/a/us-weighs-pressuring-myanmar-on-rohingya-crisis/4089060.html>.

<sup>10</sup> Syed Munir Khasru, "The Disaster Next Door: On the Rohingya Issue," *Hindu*, September 11, 2017, <http://www.thehindu.com/opinion/lead/the-disaster-next-door/article19656058.ece>.

<sup>11</sup> Kunwar Khuldune Shahid, "The Trouble with Modi's Balochistan Comments," *Diplomat*, August 21, 2016, <https://thediplomat.com/2016/08/the-trouble-with-modis-balochistan-comments/>.

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its foreign policy. Indeed, New Delhi's policy choice makes the mistake to present the Rohingya refugees as a security threat for the country, without taking into account their suffering nor the Burmese persecutions. This approach is clearly ideologically driven by an anti-Muslim approach supported by the Hindu far right.<sup>12</sup> It proves that India's policy on the Rohingya crisis cannot be explained by strategic reasons alone. And it explains why New Delhi is talking about expelling the 40,000 Rohingya refugees living in India, criminalising an entire community. Such fear is not based on any rational fact (a community cannot be, as a whole, a security threat). More importantly, it goes against the fundamental principle of international law that forbids sending and/or expelling refugees at the risk of persecution in their home country.<sup>13</sup> Of course, some like the Indian Home Minister Rajnath Singh, would claim that deportation in the case of the Rohingyas is 'not violating any international law' as New Delhi never signed the 1951 Refugee Convention. But as reminded by Bill Frelick, the Director of the Refugee Rights Program from Human Rights Watch (HRW), such an argument is fallacious:

India knows full well that certain principles of international law are considered customary international law – they are unlawful because states have long prohibited the practice as a matter of law.<sup>14</sup>

It is well-known that at least parts of customary international law have to be respected, even if treaties have not been signed. They are seen as 'peremptory norms' that are naturally followed by any civilised country. 'Non-refoulement', i.e. the fundamental principle of international law which forbids a state to return refugees to a country where they could be persecuted, is such a peremptory norm. Acting as if such notions are

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<sup>12</sup> "RSS: Rohingya are being Deported because they are a Security Threat," *Dhaka Tribune*, October 2, 2017,

<http://www.dhakatribune.com/world/south-asia/2017/10/02/rss-rohingya-security-threat/>.

<sup>13</sup> Bela Bhatia, "India is Complicit in the Rohingya Suffering," *Al Jazeera*, October 7, 2017, <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/india-complicit-rohingya-suffering-171006070126544.html>.

<sup>14</sup> Bill Frelick, "India can't Mistreat Refugees by Not Signing Refugee Convention" (New York: Human Rights Watch, September 24, 2017), <https://www.hrw.org/news/2017/09/24/india-cant-mistreat-refugees-not-signing-refugee-convention>.

unknown in New Delhi does not portray India as a 'responsible' power. The Indian Government's attitude not only goes against the notion of a responsible stakeholder, but also against respect for human rights one might expect from a democracy. It also confirms that ideologically speaking, Prime Minister Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) shares at least in part the prejudices of the Burmese Buddhist extremists.<sup>15</sup>

Such an approach reveals a darker image of PM Modi's foreign policy, but it might also be counterproductive to protect India's interests in Myanmar. Indeed, New Delhi needs a stable South-East Asian neighbour, and the crisis does not help in this regard. As Phil Robertson, Deputy Director for HRW, puts it: 'How can you have economic development if people are at each other's throats?'<sup>16</sup> Most importantly, India's attitude towards the Rohingya issue has a negative impact for South Asia as a whole. As it will be shown below, India will use Pakistan as a scapegoat to explain its rather Islamophobic policy against the Rohingya Muslims living on its soil. Such an attitude will not help the bilateral relationship between the two countries, giving another reason for Islamabad not to trust its neighbour. But more unsettling, India's policy amounts to abandoning its ally Bangladesh during troubled times.

### ***Bangladesh: On the Frontline of the Humanitarian Crisis<sup>17</sup>***

Bangladesh has good reasons to feel betrayed by its neighbour India, as well as by the Burmese Government. After all, Dhaka has been supportive of India in its fight against separatism in the North-East, proving it takes India's security needs seriously.<sup>18</sup> By making the choice to support the Burmese Government and opposing entrance to the Rohingya refugees on its territory, New Delhi does not reciprocate.

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<sup>15</sup> Subir Bhaumik, "Why is India Threatening to Deport its Rohingya Population?" *BBC News*, September 5, 2017, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-41144884>.

<sup>16</sup> "Persecution of All Myanmar's Muslims on the Rise," *Asia Times*, September 5, 2017, <http://www.atimes.com/article/persecution-myanmars-muslims-rise/>.

<sup>17</sup> Editor's Note: While this paper was going into print, Bangladesh and Myanmar agreed to a repatriation timeframe, in which Myanmar has agreed to accept 1,500 Rohingya each week, with Bangladesh returning all of them to Myanmar within two years. Aid agencies have raised concerns about forcibly repatriating them.

<sup>18</sup> Pratim Ranjan Bose, "Security is the Main Agenda in Indo-Bangla Cooperation," *Hindu Business Line*, August 25, 2016, <http://www.thehindubusinessline.com/news/bangla/article9032482.ece>.

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Bangladesh has also tried to be a good neighbour to Myanmar, and obtained the same inequitable attitude in return. Indeed, Dhaka had taken Naypyidaw's fear of ARSA into account. A few days after Rohingya rebels attacked 20 police states in the Rakhine State, Dhaka offered to organise joint military operations with the Burmese Army.<sup>19</sup> Immediately after the beginning of the latest crisis (August 25, 2017), there might have been a fear, on Bangladesh's side, to see conservative and even radical forces use the crisis to their advantage.<sup>20</sup> But beyond political speculation, it was making sense for Bangladesh to help target what has been presented as the source of the problem by the Burmese Government: the goal was to avoid more refugees and a possible humanitarian crisis. This good neighbour policy was not rewarded: Myanmar could not care less of this support as its Army wanted to get rid of the Rohingyas, seen as 'illegal Bengalis'. Rohingyas are forced to choose between death or exile in a country that is supposed to be theirs for Burmese Buddhist Far Right, i.e. Bangladesh itself. With such an ideological approach, Naypyidaw is actually expecting just one thing from Dhaka: that it deals with the consequences of the humanitarian crisis.

Recent events confirm that Bangladesh cannot count on Burma to alleviate the burden. An agreement between the two countries was supposedly reached on October 24, 2017; and a working committee to be created to help bring some of the Rohingyas home. But the only refugees who would be accepted back are the ones who have proof of land ownership - which is not the first thing that one takes when escaping genocide. Besides, it appears that the state in Myanmar is ready to take the land left by the Rohingyas, and even to harvest the crops left behind following the crackdown.<sup>21</sup> Hence, Naypyidaw's proposal about Rohingya

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<sup>19</sup> "Bangladesh Offers Myanmar Army Aid against Rohingya Rebels," *Indian Express*, August 29, 2017, <http://indianexpress.com/article/india/bangladesh-offers-myanmar-army-aid-against-rohingya-rebels-4818530/>.

<sup>20</sup> Bertil Lintner, "The World will soon have a New Terror Hub in Myanmar if the Rohingya Crisis isn't Tackled Well," *Quartz*, September 27, 2017, <https://qz.com/1088213/the-world-will-soon-have-a-new-terror-hub-in-myanmar-if-the-rohingya-crisis-isnt-tackled-well/>.

<sup>21</sup> Max Bearak, "Bangladesh is now Home to almost 1 million Rohingya Refugees," *Washington Post*, October 25, 2017, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2017/10/25/bangladesh-is-now-home-to-almost-1-million-rohingya-refugees/?utm\\_term=.ef6c111d6746](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2017/10/25/bangladesh-is-now-home-to-almost-1-million-rohingya-refugees/?utm_term=.ef6c111d6746).

land owners cannot be taken seriously. Bangladesh appears truly alone to deal with the humanitarian issue, and Burma does not appear to be a true partner of this state.

The negative impact of the Rohingya crisis can already be felt by the locals living close to the refugee camps in the country. One can see an example of that with the Teknaf and Ukhina *upazilas* (sub-units of districts). Plantations have been destroyed, economic and educational activities have been disturbed, prices have skyrocketed, and there have been reports of criminal activities linked to the refugees.<sup>22</sup> This is not really a surprise, as despite the efforts made by Bangladesh and the humanitarian help given by Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) and locals, the massive influx of people still means that the refugee camps are barely liveable. With locals being outnumbered by the refugees two to one,<sup>23</sup> things can only get worse.

Indeed, there is also a significant risk of a health crisis related to these refugees in Bangladesh. The massive arrival of new refugees from August 25 has meant the evolution of different Rohingya settlements into one enormous slum. It does not have clean water, enough latrines,<sup>24</sup> or even the minimum facilities to protect the refugees from rain. NGOs have tried to help, installing tube-wells and sanitary latrines for the camps. However, recently Bangladesh's Department of Public Health Engineering (DPHE) announced that their efforts might have been counterproductive, as they did not follow health regulations. It appears that a safe distance between latrines and tube-wells has not been maintained. In some cases, drinking water was already contaminated, making the development of waterborne diseases very likely. This is already the case, with a rising number of refugees suffering from skin diseases, dysentery, and diarrhoea.<sup>25</sup> Bangladesh decided, as a

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<sup>22</sup> Tarek Mahmud, "Rohingya Influx: Refugees Outnumber Ukhiya, Teknaf Locals," *Dhaka Tribune*, October 23, 2017, <http://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/2017/10/23/rohingya-influx-refugees-outnumber-ukhiya-teknaf-locals/>.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Kate White, "Rohingya in Bangladesh: An Unfolding Public Health Emergency," *The Lancet* 390, no. 10106 (2017): 1947, [http://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736\(17\)32677-6/fulltext](http://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736(17)32677-6/fulltext).

<sup>25</sup> Tarek Mahmud, "Rohingya Camps on the Brink of Waterborne Disease Outbreak," *Dhaka Tribune*, October 27, 2017,



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consequence, to vaccinate the Rohingya against cholera between the month of October and the beginning of November 2017.<sup>26</sup> But without proper international support, it is possible that this humanitarian disaster will also become a health crisis in the future.

Last but not least, if the international community does not act decisively to deal with the Rohingya crisis, the security-related impact on Bangladesh might be another problem, similar to how the Taliban were able to find foot soldiers in Afghan refugee camps in Pakistan. In those two examples, camps have been incubators of a violent reaction to the lack of political, peaceful solutions for the Palestinian question or the Afghan crisis.<sup>27</sup> This potential violent reaction could not only target Burma but also the host country, as it happened before, in the Palestinian case.<sup>28</sup>

### **What Does the Crisis Mean for Pakistan?**

Geographically speaking, Bangladesh and India are close to Myanmar, making the latter country's problem an issue for them too, to some extent. This is not Pakistan's case. For Islamabad, the Rohingya crisis matters, for political reasons at least.

### ***A General Analysis***

For Pakistan, problems are much more linked to the Afghan crisis and the perpetual tensions with India than to the current situation in Burma. The founder Muhammad Ali Jinnah himself refused a risky proposal by Rohingya leaders to integrate their territory in Burma in Pakistan. He met General Aung San before he was assassinated and reassured him:

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<http://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/2017/10/26/rohingya-camps-waterborne-diseases-outbreak/>.

<sup>26</sup> "Cholera Vaccines for Rohingyas: Health Minister," *Daily Star*, October 9, 2017, <http://www.thedailystar.net/rohingya-crisis/cholera-vaccines-rohingyas-bangladesh-health-minister-1473802>.

<sup>27</sup> For a reminder of the fact that camps can be incubators of future political violence, see, for example, Robert A. McLeman, *Climate and Human Migration: Past Experiences, Future Challenges* (New York : Cambridge University Press, 2013), 216.

<sup>28</sup> For example, Jordan. For details, see Spencer C. Tucker and Priscilla Mary Roberts, eds., *The Encyclopedia of the Arab-Israeli Conflict: A Political, Social, and Military History* (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2008), 223-224.

Pakistanis will not support a revolt of the Muslim minority. On the contrary, Jinnah invited them to live as loyal citizens of the Burmese state.<sup>29</sup> Some have even held Jinnah responsible for the suffering of the Rohingya.<sup>30</sup> This is inaccurate because first and foremost, the founder of Pakistan expected them to be treated as citizens, equal to other Burmese. Besides, this unfair criticism against Jinnah does not take into account the fact that the Pakistan project was from the start rooted in South Asia.<sup>31</sup> From its birth the country has had two serious geopolitical rivals as neighbours: India and Afghanistan. It would have been unwise to make more enemies.

It is important to mention that Pakistan has been one of the countries hosting the most Rohingya refugees, with Bangladesh.<sup>32</sup> Those are refugees from an earlier exodus, in the 1970s and 1980s. Unfortunately, here too, these Rohingyas have had difficulties renewing or obtaining Pakistani identification cards without which it is impossible to have access to healthcare, education for the young generation, and employment; and they are said to be harassed by police, especially those living in the Arakanabad slum in Karachi.<sup>33</sup>

Such criticism can easily be mitigated by taking into account the context: the main concern in terms of refugees, for Pakistan, has been coming from Afghanistan, making issues related to the Rohingyas less visible. Still, like in India, the Rohingya crisis can feed a much-needed national political debate on refugees, identity, and how society, as a whole, deals with its minorities. As reminded by Raza Rumi, the terrorists who

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<sup>29</sup> Ye Htut, "A Background to the Security Crisis in Northern Rakhine," *ISEAS Perspective*, no.79 (2017): 1-10(2),

[https://www.iseas.edu.sg/images/pdf/ISEAS\\_Perspective\\_2017\\_79.pdf](https://www.iseas.edu.sg/images/pdf/ISEAS_Perspective_2017_79.pdf).

<sup>30</sup> See, for example, Kunwar Khuldune Shahid, "Pakistan and the Rohingyas," *Nation*, June 11, 2015, <http://nation.com.pk/11-Jun-2015/pakistan-and-the-rohingyas>.

<sup>31</sup> Yasser Latif Hamdani, "Jinnah, Rohingyas and Pakistan," *Daily Times*, September 11, 2017, <http://dailytimes.com.pk/opinion/11-Sep-17/jinnah-rohingyas-and-pakistan>.

<sup>32</sup> Mehreen Zahra-Malik, "Far from Myanmar Violence, Rohingya in Pakistan are Seething," *New York Times*, September 12, 2017, [https://www.nytimes.com/2017/09/12/world/asia/rohingya-pakistan-myanmar-violence.html?mcubz=1&\\_r=1](https://www.nytimes.com/2017/09/12/world/asia/rohingya-pakistan-myanmar-violence.html?mcubz=1&_r=1).

<sup>33</sup> Sophia Saifi, "Pakistan's Stateless Rohingya," *CNN.com*, September 11, 2017, <http://edition.cnn.com/2017/09/11/asia/pakistan-stateless-rohingya/index.html>.

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targeted Pakistanis themselves, and in particular minorities like the Shia Muslims, are no different than the Buddhist Far Right in Burma.<sup>34</sup>

The future impact on identity politics, and even foreign policy, should not be underestimated. It is worth noting the diversity of people who have organised protests against Myanmar's policy towards the Rohingyas proving that the crisis has had a wide impact.<sup>35</sup> It is not only a right-wing/conservative *cause célèbre*, it is an important issue for the whole society - a reminder that Pakistan is seen as a refuge for Asian Muslims, hence, as a country defined by this particular identity.<sup>36</sup> With New Delhi using identity politics when it comes to the Rohingya crisis, political actors in Pakistan might be tempted to do the same. And even the less inclined, in Pakistan, to be vocal on this issue at the international stage might be forced to go with the flow. Indeed, other Muslim countries, like Turkey, have used this crisis to be vocal on the Rohingya crisis, and appear as natural leaders of/for the Muslim world.<sup>37</sup> As an important Muslim country in Asia, Pakistan has been naturally part of the diplomatic pressure on Burma.<sup>38</sup> However, identity politics has never truly controlled Pakistan's foreign policy - Pakistani elites have rather focused on a realist approach defending the interests of the state.<sup>39</sup> But the specific shock caused by this crisis and the internal and external pressures that it provokes for Pakistan might influence Islamabad's choices in the foreseeable future.

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<sup>34</sup> Raza Rumi, "Our Selective Solidarity with the *Ummah*," *Daily Times*, September 17, 2017, <http://dailytimes.com.pk/opinion/17-Sep-17/our-selective-solidarity-with-the-ummah->.

<sup>35</sup> Pamela Constable, "The Horror of the Rohingya Crisis has Enraged Pakistanis, Sparking Huge Protests," *Washington Post*, September 12, 2017, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia\\_pacific/why-the-plight-of-the-rohingyas-is-stirring-a-wave-of-protest-in-pakistan/2017/09/11/ed946aee-96ef-11e7-af6a-6555caaeb8dc\\_story.html?utm\\_term=.c5731027523d](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia_pacific/why-the-plight-of-the-rohingyas-is-stirring-a-wave-of-protest-in-pakistan/2017/09/11/ed946aee-96ef-11e7-af6a-6555caaeb8dc_story.html?utm_term=.c5731027523d).

<sup>36</sup> Faisal Devji, *Muslim Zion: Pakistan as a Political Idea* (London: Hurst & Company, 2013), 48.

<sup>37</sup> See, for example, Simon P. Watmough, "Turkey, the Rohingya Crisis and Erdoğan's Ambitions to be a Global Muslim Leader," *Conversation*, September 14, 2017, <https://theconversation.com/turkey-the-rohingya-crisis-and-erdogans-ambitions-to-be-a-global-muslim-leader-83854>.

<sup>38</sup> "Pakistan Urges World to put Pressure on Myanmar," *Dawn*, September 7, 2017, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1356179>.

<sup>39</sup> Aasim Sajjad Akhtar, "Muslim 'Solidarity,'" *Dawn*, September 8, 2017, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1356232/muslim-solidarity>.

Could this truly have a lasting impact on Pakistan's foreign affairs? This would depend on two important issues: how Burma's policy towards the Rohingyas is perceived internationally; and, most importantly, the consequences of said crisis on matters of primary importance to Islamabad. For example, if India continues to play the identity card on the way it deals with the Rohingya refugees, Pakistan will most probably position itself in opposition to New Delhi. Since Partition, India has been seen from Pakistan as its primary security threat. It makes sense that the policy chosen in New Delhi on the Rohingya crisis will have an impact on Islamabad. It is with its relationship with India in mind that Pakistan developed its links with Myanmar in 2015, following the American and British examples. The bilateral relationship strengthened at that time in particular at the military level (training, defence diplomacy, etc.).<sup>40</sup> This might be in danger in the months to come if the pressures linked to the Rohingya crisis stay unabated. But only to a point: as a consequence of its constant conflict with India, another permanent feature in Pakistan's foreign policy is the need of a strong ally able to help contain the main threat from Islamabad's point of view. Historically, this has been USA, but since the beginning of the Twenty-First Century, this role has been fulfilled by China.<sup>41</sup>

Myanmar is of particular interest for China, from an economic and geopolitical point of view.<sup>42</sup> The sale of the famous JF-17 aircraft to the Myanmar Air Force is a reminder of this fact. If said aircraft is a Pakistani-Chinese project, the deal has been done by Beijing, and Pakistan has no influence over the sale, once its East Asian partner wants it to happen. China's friendship is too important for Islamabad: broadly speaking, it will not risk it over a divergence of views on the Rohingya crisis and react to the Tatmadaw's<sup>43</sup> actions against the Muslim minority.

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<sup>40</sup> Kamal Alam, "Should Pakistan Cut Military Ties with Myanmar," *TRTWorld.com*, September 11, 2017, <https://www.trtworld.com/opinion/should-pakistan-cut-military-ties-with-myanmar--10406>.

<sup>41</sup> Aparna Pande, *Explaining Pakistan's Foreign Policy: Escaping India*, Routledge Contemporary South Asia Series, 1st ed. (New York: Routledge, 2011), 113-114.

<sup>42</sup> Kinling Lo, "The Economic Stakes for China in Myanmar's Restive Rakhine," *South China Morning Post*, September 22, 2017, <http://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy-defence/article/2112366/economic-stakes-china-myanmars-restive-rakhine>.

<sup>43</sup> The official name of the Burmese Armed Forces.

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A factor such as this is likely to greatly limit Pakistan's potential foreign policy changes in relation to the said crisis.

Last but not least, the Rohingya crisis also matters as one that could potentially hurt the country's image. Indeed, some have accused Islamabad of being associated with security issues linked to it. In India, the idea that 'Pakistani-based militants' like the ones affiliated with Lashkar-e-Taiba are working with Rohingya militants in Bangladesh predates the latest crisis.<sup>44</sup> After the beginning of crisis, a Burmese newspaper used unverified information from Indian and Bangladeshi intelligence 'sources', linking ARSA, Pakistan, and the August 25 rebel attacks in Myanmar.<sup>45</sup> There has been proof of Burmese fighters affiliated with foreign forces, for example, the Taliban as they have been captured by soldiers from the Northern Alliance during the American campaign in Afghanistan in October 2001. Some were 'Pakistanis of Burmese descent who had never been to Burma.' And there have been rumours of Kashmiri/Pakistani groups like *Harakat-ul-Mujahideen* and *Harakat-ul-Ansar* sent to train Rohingya rebels.<sup>46</sup> But the accusation from the so-called 'intelligence sources' is going beyond those facts, making Pakistan responsible for the current crisis, and the Rohingya victims portrayed as infiltrators working for Islamabad. Seen as a fifth column for Pakistan, some Indian politicians have gone as far as saying that Rohingya Muslims should be expelled and sent to Pakistan,<sup>47</sup> which as mentioned earlier, says more about Hindu nationalism and Islamophobia in India than anything else. But does the idea of associating Pakistan to ARSA or any other

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<sup>44</sup> See, for example, Prashant Jha, "Lashkar Militants Inciting Rohingya Refugees, India Warns Myanmar," *Hindustan Times*, February 7, 2017, <http://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/india-tells-myanmar-rohingya-issue-ticking-bomb-will-come-back-to-haunt-region/story-m7b2QFQn13uzOfX4nK9PW1.html>.

<sup>45</sup> "Pakistan, ISIS Allegedly behind Rakhine Imbroglio: Myanmar's Mizzima," *bdnews24.com*, September 6, 2017, <https://bdnews24.com/neighbours/2017/09/06/pakistan-isis-allegedly-behind-rakhine-imbroglio-myanmars-mizzima>.

<sup>46</sup> Strangely, those supposed trainers are said to have been expelled by Burma, not arrested for terrorist activities. See Andrew Selth, "Burma's Muslims and the War on Terror," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 27, no. 2(2004): 107-126(115-116).

<sup>47</sup> "BJP Minister Giriraj Singh Thinks Pakistan Should 'Take Away' India's Rohingya Refugees," *HuffPost*, September 19, 2017, [http://www.huffingtonpost.in/2017/09/19/bjp-minister-giriraj-singh-thinks-pakistan-should-take-away-indias-rohingya-refugees\\_a\\_23214769/](http://www.huffingtonpost.in/2017/09/19/bjp-minister-giriraj-singh-thinks-pakistan-should-take-away-indias-rohingya-refugees_a_23214769/).

security-related issue in Burma make any sense, when one focuses on what is known through open sources?

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In fact, the issue with such accusations is that they do not hold water. The idea that Burma’s security issues are coming from foreign interference does not make sense when one takes into account the details of what has been happening in Rakhine State since the beginning of the crisis. One might reasonably argue that the current crisis has nothing to do with the so-called terrorism linked to a Rohingya rebellion. This is clear when one takes note of the United Nations (UN) report released on October 11, 2017. It discusses what was already known at the beginning of the crisis - burning of crops, homes, whole villages, torture and rape of women and children is an attitude that does not look like a counterterrorist operation, to say the least. But what the UN report reveals, and what confirms the ethnic cleansing claims, is that such ‘clearance operations’ targeting the Rohingya began *before* the attacks launched by the ARSA.<sup>48</sup> It is also clear that before these attacks, there has been use of extremist Buddhist militias to help terrorise the Rohingyas. For years, if not decades, Rohingyas, only pointed out as ‘Bengalis’ living illegally in Burma, have been seen as an internal enemy and treated as such. Hence, at the beginning of the latest crisis, the Rohingyas have naturally been targeted by the state as ‘one insurgent collective.’<sup>49</sup> Such an attitude is not helpful for counterterrorism, but makes sense when the policy chosen is ethnic cleansing. Here, terrorism is an excuse, rather than a real threat.

Besides, is the ARSA a true security threat fed by outside forces? Their fighters seem to be known, first and foremost, for two series of attacks, in October 2016 and in August 2017. The first wave of attacks targeted police posts, and ARSA’s ‘fighters’ had only ‘machetes and other

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<sup>48</sup> Nicola Smith, “Rohingya Muslims ‘being Starved Out’ by Burmese Army as New Surge Crosses into Bangladesh,” *Telegraph*, October 12, 2017, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2017/10/12/burmese-army-using-starvation-new-tool-drive-rohingya-burma/>.

<sup>49</sup> Angshuman Choudhury, “Rakhine Violence: Unraveling the Context and State Response,” *Diplomat*, September 13, 2017, <http://thediplomat.com/2017/09/rakhine-violence-unraveling-the-context-and-state-response/>.

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primitive weapons' at their disposal.<sup>50</sup> The latest one, on August 25, 2017, targeted 20-30 police/security force posts. But it was not very successful. Indeed, during those attacks, it suffered heavy casualties and was not able to retrieve many weapons from the attack. It appears to be able to mobilise a sizeable number of 'fighters' or at least of followers in the Rohingya population, and to be well-organised.<sup>51</sup> It also has been able to win the hearts and minds of the people, especially by the respect it shows to women.<sup>52</sup> But they do not seem to have ever had the numbers to attack Myanmar's security forces.

The clear lack of modern weapons makes the idea of ARSA as a credible guerrilla force in Rakhine State difficult to believe.<sup>53</sup> ARSA has been supposedly created and focused on training since 2013. But its first real attack was on October 2016.<sup>54</sup> It is rather unusual, for a guerrilla group, to wait to strike the enemy in a noticeable way for 3 years except if it does not have the military means to strike (weapons, training etc.). In a report, the International Crisis Group (ICG) claims that ARSA has had training in Bangladesh, but also in Burma itself, in Rakhine State, by Rohingya and even supposed Afghan and Pakistani trainers. It claims that ARSA has been trained to use improvised explosive devices (IEDs) and other explosives.<sup>55</sup> The problem with these claims is that they have not been verified in reality. If any such trainers were in Rakhine State, how come none were captured during the military crackdown after August 25?

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<sup>50</sup> Zachary Abuza, "Who are the Arakan Salvation Army?" *Radio Free Asia*, September 1, 2017,

<http://www.rfa.org/english/commentaries/arsa-commentary-09012017155658.html>.

<sup>51</sup> Adil Sakhawat, "An Anatomy of ARSA – Behind the Masks and Guns," *Dhaka Tribune*, October 20, 2017, <http://www.dhakatribune.com/world/south-asia/2017/10/20/anatomy-arsa-behind-masks-guns/>.

<sup>52</sup> Adil Sakhawat, "For Rohingya Women, ARSA is Family and Salvation," *Dhaka Tribune*, October 21, 2017,

<http://www.dhakatribune.com/world/south-asia/2017/10/21/rohingya-women-arsa-family-salvation/>.

<sup>53</sup> "Machetes vs. Machine Guns: Rohingya Salvation Army Outgunned in Myanmar," *Express Tribune*, September 6, 2017, <https://tribune.com.pk/story/1499299/machetes-vs-machine-guns-rohingya-salvation-army-outgunned-myanmar/>.

<sup>54</sup> "Myanmar: Who are the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army?" *BBC News*, September 6, 2017, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-41160679>.

<sup>55</sup> ICG, *Myanmar: A New Muslim Insurgency in Rakhine State*, report no. 283 (Brussels: International Crisis Group, 2016), 19, 23, <https://d2071andvip0wj.cloudfront.net/283-myanmar-a-new-muslim-insurgency-in-rakhine-state.pdf>.



They would have been very useful for the Burmese state's propaganda. How come their 'knowledge related to explosives' has not been used more extensively? How is it that with such outside support, ARSA has found itself with so little weapons? How come the training and capabilities exposed by ICG (and others) did not mean more success for the guerrilla group against the Burmese forces after August 25?

The ICG report claims to have interviewed locals, ARSA's members, 'well-known sources' all the way to the Middle East, and cross-referenced what they got with Burmese Government reports. The ICG is known for its professionalism; but on Burma, its analysis has seriously been brought into question even in the past, for example by a well-known researcher and democracy advocate, Dr Maung Zarni.<sup>56</sup> Such disconnect between the given information making ARSA a credible force, and the recent facts is a reminder of the limits of research on security-related subjects, when the only possible ways to get information are through interviews (not always reliable) and reports given by the Burmese regime.

The crackdown on the Rohingya since the end of August 2017 has definitely put a stop to the idea that ARSA is a real danger for Myanmar's security forces locally. For now, the Salvation Army clearly appears like a self-defence group, reacting against oppression with the little means it has. It is striking to see that in its statements, ARSA does not show any desire for a wider ideological/regional agenda, not even a separatist one. It has made clear that it has no links with the *jihadist* groups in South Asia or elsewhere.<sup>57</sup> And it seems very eager to stop the fight while a real genocide is being organised against its people: after declaring a unilateral ceasefire, it wants to negotiate surrendering under UN supervision.<sup>58</sup> Talking about surrendering makes sense only when one is not strong enough to protect civilians targeted by Burma's forces. It appears that

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<sup>56</sup> Maung Zarni, "Outrageously Optimistic," *Himal*, October 14, 2012, <http://www.maungzarni.net/2012/10/outrageously-optimistic.html>.

<sup>57</sup> Faisal Edroos, "ARSA: Who are the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army?" September 13, 2017, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/09/myanmar-arakan-rohingya-salvation-army-170912060700394.html>.

<sup>58</sup> Adil Sakhawat, "Exclusive: ARSA Open to Surrender, but only under UN Supervision," *Dhaka Tribune*, October 22, 2017, <http://www.dhakatribune.com/world/south-asia/2017/10/21/exclusive-arsa-open-surrender-un-supervision/>.



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ARSA has been mostly efficient as a tool for Burmese repression than as a terrorist/guerrilla group.

#### **Conclusion**

The ARSA lacks funds, weapons, and is not a serious threat to the Burmese military forces. A non-state actor that would have benefitted from training and support from outside sources would have been able to be more efficient than what we have witnessed so far. Hence, accusing Pakistan of having any influence on the Rohingya Muslims' rebellion against Myanmar is ludicrous. Still, such rumours coming from India will, without a doubt, feed the trust deficit between Islamabad and New Delhi.

The crisis can only be solved through strong pressure on Burma, a recognition of its genocidal policy, and sanctions from the international community until Myanmar stops its chauvinist and racist policies against the Rohingya. Because of the Great Powers' incapacity to act, this seems very unlikely, and means the continuation of ethnic cleansing/genocide against this Muslim minority; Bangladesh having to deal with the terrible consequences of the crisis; and broadly speaking, an impact of the crisis on South Asia that will only grow stronger.

The martyrdom of the Rohingya, massacred in part because of their religion, will provoke the ire of many in Bangladesh, but also in Pakistan. Bangladesh's Government might decide, over time, to see Burma as an enemy. After all, Naypyidaw's policy is based on anti-Bengali racism, and the Burmese policy is clearly expecting Dhaka to deal with the negative consequence of the ethnic cleansing. It might turn the Rohingya crisis into a Cold War between the two countries. Over time, in a worst-case scenario, if the international community is still unable to act, an armed conflict between Bangladesh and Burma is very much a possibility, with Islamabad and New Delhi potentially backing the opposing sides.■