



The Systematic Rohingya Genocide and the Muslim Moral Imperative

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The Rohingya refugee crisis is one of the greatest humanitarian disasters of our generation. Over 700,000 Rohingya have been expelled from their homes in Rakhine state, Myanmar, since August 2017.¹ In the process of this mass exodus, thousands have been murdered in the most horrific and brutal ways. The victims have been men, women, and children who were targeted simply because they belonged to a Muslim minority ethnic group. The crisis has been described by UN officials as ethnic cleansing.² However, a more apt term for what has happened to the Rohingya is [genocide](#). In September 2018, Canada recognized the crimes committed against the Rohingya at the hands of the Myanmar military as constituting genocide and urged the UN Security Council to take action.³ More recently, in November 2019, Gambia filed a lawsuit with the International Court of Justice in The Hague, accusing Myanmar of genocide.⁴

This article outlines some of the key issues and events that have laid the foundation for this horrific tragedy. Furthermore, this article will discuss the current situation of the Rohingya and the Muslim moral imperative to work for necessary change in response to this crisis. There are a number of instances in history where Muslim leadership has intervened to alleviate the suffering of Muslim communities in various parts of the Muslim world. From as early as the first century of the *hijrah*, during the *Khulafā' Rāshidūn*, to as recent as Ottoman rule in the mid-19th century, our history is replete with examples of Muslim leadership taking decisive action to preserve the sanctity of Muslim lives in the face of devastation. These examples demonstrate how Muslims have traditionally responded to crises afflicting Muslim communities and they form the basis of our discussion for a Muslim moral imperative towards positive and productive action.

¹ “Refugee Response in Bangladesh,” UNHCR Operational Portal Refugee Situations, updated September 20, 2019, https://data2.unhcr.org/en/situations/myanmar_refugees.

² “‘No Other Conclusion,’ Ethnic Cleansing of Rohingyas in Myanmar Continues – Senior UN Rights Official,” UN News, March 6, 2018, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2018/03/1004232>.

³ “Canada Accuses Myanmar of Genocide against Rohingya,” *The Guardian* (US edition), September 20, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/sep/21/canada-accuses-myanmar-of-genocide-against-rohingya>.

⁴ Marlise Simons, “Myanmar Genocide Lawsuit Is Filed at United Nations Court,” *The New York Times*, November 11, 2019, updated January 23, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/11/11/world/asia/myanmar-rohingya-genocide.html>.

The Rohingya genocide and the subsequent refugee crisis did not occur in a vacuum or without warning. Like all genocides, it was systematic, procedural, and many years in the making. As described in previous articles published by Yaqeen Institute,⁵ a number of the processes that brought about the Rohingya genocide can be described as Structural Islamophobia—a situation where Islamophobic actions and treatment become normalized in society through targeted legislation aimed at oppressing and marginalizing Muslims. The tragic case of the Rohingya genocide demonstrates the most horrific consequences of unchallenged structural Islamophobia. Historians and scholars in the fields of ethnic conflict and violence have described genocide as a process that typically takes place in eight stages.⁶ These stages are classification, symbolization, dehumanization, organization, polarization, preparation, extermination, and denial. Below we outline how these stages have culminated in the Rohingya genocide and subsequent refugee crisis.

The Rohingya crisis and the case of genocide

Classification and symbolization are common processes experienced by minority communities around the world. They involve simply classifying and categorizing ethnic, religious, or cultural groups as ‘other’ within a society. This is experienced by many groups considered to be ‘non-normative’ within the society they identify with. The stages of dehumanization and organization involve stripping away the humanity of a group, as well as informal or state-sanctioned groups forming and organizing to confront, attack, or murder groups of marginalized people. In the case of the Rohingya, they have been vilified and dehumanized through political discourse, radio programming, and other forms of state propaganda, particularly throughout the period of military rule in the 1960s and onwards.⁷ Polarization of the Rohingya has occurred in many forms, the most overt examples are laws that prohibited Buddhist women from marrying Muslim men,⁸ as well as laws that

⁵ Naved Bakali, “Islamophobia and the Law: Unpacking Structural Islamophobia,” *Yaqeen Institute for Islamic Research*, November 14, 2019, <https://yaqeeninstitute.org/navedbakali/islamophobia-and-the-law-unpacking-structural-islamophobia/#.XkuJaiN9iM8>.

⁶ “Refugee Response in Bangladesh.”

⁷ Francis Wade, *Myanmar’s Enemy Within: Buddhist Violence and the Making of a Muslim ‘Other’* (London: Zed Books, 2017).

⁸ Azeem Ibrahim, *The Rohingyas: Inside Myanmar’s Genocide* (London: Hurst & Company, 2018).

limited the number of children that the Rohingya could have.⁹ These are clear instances of how Structural Islamophobia was operationalized to oppress and marginalize the Muslim Rohingya population. Through this legislation, the Rohingya were limited to having two children, a measure that effectively curtailed the natural population growth of this ethnic community.

With regard to the stage of preparation, prior to the violence in 2017, many Rohingya were relegated to internal camps along the Sittwe Coast of Myanmar as a form of ghettoizing and separating them from the rest of Burmese society. Through this process, the Rohingya were denied access to health care, mobility, education, and economic opportunities to earn a livelihood.¹⁰ Further indications of this stage can be inferred by the massive number of deaths from August 2017 to September 2017, when over 9,000 Rohingya were murdered.¹¹ This vast number of casualties cannot logically be understood or explained without there being some form of organized and coordinated militaristic and Buddhist extremist mob mobilization. Extermination is the most apparent stage of a genocide, which involves the mass killing of a group that has gone through the above-mentioned phases. There is no denying that this has occurred in the case of the Rohingya since August 2017.

With regards to the stage of denial, we are still in the early phases; however, there are indications that this will likely occur. Prior to the August 2017 violence and in its aftermath, state rhetoric promoted by the military, as well as by the Prime Minister Aung San Suu Kyi, claimed that the Rohingya did not even exist as a distinct ethnic group. Rather, the Rohingya were consistently referred to as ‘Bengalis.’ As such, prior to the genocide, the Rohingyas’ history and collective identities have been denied by the state of Myanmar. Aung San Suu Kyi has also claimed, with regards to the outbreak of violence in 2017, that violence was being committed by ‘both sides.’ Furthermore, she has staunchly defended the Myanmar

⁹ “Burma: Revoke ‘Two-Child Policy’ for Rohingya,” Human Rights Watch, May 28, 2013, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2013/05/28/burma-revoke-two-child-policy-rohingya>.

¹⁰ Wade, *Myanmar’s Enemy Within*.

¹¹ “‘No One Was Left’: Death and Violence Against the Rohingya in Rakhine State, Myanmar,” Médecins Sans Frontières, March 2018, <https://msf.or.ke/sites/default/files/msfpublications/no-one-was-left.pdf>.

military in voluntary testimony to the International Court of Justice against charges of genocide.¹²

History of the Rohingya

The Rohingya are a distinct Muslim ethnic group, native to the area of Arakan, which is in current-day Rakhine state in Myanmar. They are one of the many ethnically and linguistically diverse groups residing in Myanmar who are distinct from the Burmese majority. It is unknown exactly when the Rohingya migrated to Arakan. Some historians believe that they are descendants of Indo-Arian ethnic groups that migrated to the region over three millennia ago.¹³ Others have argued that their ancestors consist of a combination of various ruling dynasties that historically ruled over the region throughout the 16th to 18th centuries. What can be said definitively about the Rohingya is that during British colonial rule over present-day Myanmar, census information indicated the presence of an indigenous Muslim minority group called the ‘Rooinga’ who were native to that land prior to British rule in the 1820s.¹⁴ As such, there is strong evidence suggesting that the Rohingya have been indigenous to the Arakan region for centuries. Some may question why the Rohingya differ from the majority of inhabitants of Arakan and Myanmar if they are indigenous to that land. One key point to understand when investigating the history of the Rohingya is that current-day Rakhine state, which is at the western edge of Myanmar bordering Bangladesh, was not historically a part of what constituted the dominion of ethnically Burmese communities. At various points in history, the geographic area of Arakan had fallen into the hands of various rulers from Burma proper, as well as the Mughals and ruling dynasties from Bengal.¹⁵ Some time around 1000 AD there was a mass migration of a Burmese ethnic group to Arakan called the Rakhine. Arakan was home to various ethnic and religious groups; however, with this mass migration, the Rakhine over time came to dominate the region, which eventually became known as Rakhine

¹² Amanda Taub and Max Fisher, “Did the World Get Aung San Suu Kyi Wrong?,” *New York Times*, October 31, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/31/world/asia/aung-san-suu-kyi-myanmar.html>.

¹³ Ibrahim, *Rohingyas*.

¹⁴ Ibrahim, *Rohingyas*.

¹⁵ Anthony Ware and Costas Laoutides, *Myanmar’s ‘Rohingya’ Conflict* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018).

state. It was through the creation of the nation-state in the colonial and post-colonial era that the area currently referred to as Rakhine state formally became a part of Burma proper, which ultimately became current-day Myanmar.

This backstory of the Rohingya is vital, as the rhetoric being used by the military and Buddhist extremist mobs who were at the forefront of the Rohingya exodus and genocide repeatedly reinforce the narrative that the Rohingya are foreigners who were brought in by the British during the colonial period. Though the British did bring in labor migrants from India to work in various agricultural sectors of the colony, they were mostly Hindu.¹⁶ There is ample evidence suggesting that the Rohingya's existence in Myanmar predates the colonial occupation by centuries, as they were considered one of the many indigenous groups living in the region prior to the arrival of the Hindu labor migrants from India. However, the distinction between Rohingya and these labor migrants began to fade during military rule in Burma in the 1960s, which was a key turning point leading to heightened tensions with the Rohingya.

Origins of the conflict

As indicated, prior to the colonial period, the Rohingya were one of many indigenous minorities in the region of Arakan. While there were instances of strife and discord between these various religious and ethnic groups, they generally lived in relative calm and peace. This began to change during the period of British colonization. During British rule over the region, as was a common practice in many colonized areas, colonizers gave preference with regards to social mobility and administration of the colony to Muslim minorities over the Buddhist majority. This became the starting point of tensions between these religious and ethnic communities. During the period of World War Two, Myanmar was invaded by the Japanese. The Burmese Buddhist majority had aligned with the Japanese, while the Rohingya had stayed loyal to the British. The British had made promises to the Rohingya with regards to land and autonomy because of their loyalty during this conflict; however, after the war ended, the promises were not honored. In the

¹⁶ Ibrahim, *Rohingyas*.

aftermath of World War Two, tensions between the Burmese majority and the Rohingya became intensified due to what the Burmese viewed as conflicting loyalties on the part of the Rohingya. These tensions were exacerbated when the Rohingya petitioned for parts of Rakhine state to be annexed by East Pakistan during the 1947 partition between India and Pakistan.¹⁷ When this annexation did not take place, the Buddhist majority began to seriously doubt the Rohingya's allegiance. In the 1947 Burmese Constitution, the Rohingya along with other minority ethnic groups in Rakhine were not granted citizenship but were granted National Registration Certificates, which gave them full legal and voting rights. The Rohingya were informed that they did not need to apply for citizenship certificates because they were recognized as one of the indigenous races of the Union of Burma.¹⁸ From this it can be inferred that, despite existing tensions between various ethnic groups in Burma, the Rohingya were treated like any other minority ethnic group and that eventually there would have been a naturalization process. Unfortunately, this would never come to pass, as military rule drastically changed the political landscape of Burma.

In 1962, Burma came under the military rule of Ne Win in a coup d'état. The Rohingya were steadily losing their rights under the military regime and experienced a major shift in 1974 as a result of the Emergency Immigration Act. This law instituted ethnicity-based identity cards called National Registration Certificates, which identified Burmese nationals. The Rohingya were issued Foreign Registration Cards, designating them non-nationals. Furthermore, the 1974 constitution, Article 145 stated that "All persons born of parents both of whom are nationals of the Socialist Republic of the Union of Burma are citizens of the Union."¹⁹ Article 145 along with the Emergency Immigration Act de facto made the Rohingya stateless, as they were considered foreigners in lands they had been indigenous to for centuries. These severe citizenship laws were politically expedient when the military was facing an economic crisis. They believed that unity could be achieved through nativist laws and propaganda that targeted

¹⁷ Wade, *Myanmar's Enemy Within*.

¹⁸ Ibrahim, *Rohingyas*.

¹⁹ Ibrahim, *Rohingyas*.

minority groups and reinforced the notion of Buddhist identity as a basis of citizenship.

The increasingly stringent laws targeting Rohingya from the 1970s through the 1990s led to mass violence against and abuse of this minority group at the hands of the Burmese Buddhist majority. The state's open targeting of the Rohingya eventually led to 200,000 Rohingya fleeing to Bangladesh in 1978, and another wave of 250,000 between 1991-1992. In both instances, the Bangladeshi government sent most of the fleeing Rohingya back to Myanmar only to return to lands that had been confiscated and re-appropriated, forcing many to become laborers on lands they had once owned.²⁰ Ultimately the targeting of the Rohingya was a by-product of an economic crisis sparked by a disastrous period of military rule. The regime felt it necessary to find internal enemies to detract from the economic crisis that embroiled the nation. This was accomplished by targeting the Rohingya 'Other,' as well as by promoting nativism through a Burmese-Buddhist national identity. The Rohingya were an easy and safe target as they were different ethnically, religiously, and linguistically from the Burmese Buddhist majority. Furthermore, they were less militarized than other minority groups in the Rakhine region.

The current crisis

There were a number of unsuccessful attempts to democratize Burma during military rule. Things began to slowly change in the aftermath of a natural disaster in 2008 called Cyclone Nargis. Cyclone Nargis had devastating impacts on Myanmar, destroying 65 percent of the country's rice fields and 95 percent of buildings in the delta region.²¹ The ferocious cyclone was believed to have left an estimated 138,000 dead. Under military rule, there was a gross mismanagement of the disaster response by the state, which led to mass discontent in the nation. To ease some of these tensions, the military was forced to allow new elections in 2010. Through a continual process of political parties boycotting elections and

²⁰ Ware and Laoutides, *Myanmar's 'Rohingya' Conflict*.

²¹ Donald M. Seekins, "The Social, Political and Humanitarian Impact of Burma's Cyclone Nargis," *Asia-Pacific Journal* 6, no. 5 (May 3, 2018).

growing public discontent, a democratic government was finally able to come to power in Myanmar in 2015. The National League for Democracy's (NLD) victory, led by Nobel Peace Prize Laureate Aung San Suu Kyi, was hailed by the world as a sign of democratic progress and the potential for a glowing bright future for the nation.

A key factor enabling Aung San Suu Kyi to win the election was her ability to gain support from various Buddhist groups. Through the forging of this alliance, the NLD was able to gain popular support from the masses. However, despite the façade of a democratically elected government in Myanmar, the military had placed checks and balances to ensure its economic dominance and influence within the government. The former military regime allowed for Myanmar to transition into a democracy by retaining 25% of the parliament through the Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP), a political party that serves as a front for the military to maintain significant control over the affairs of the nation.²² As the military held key positions in the parliament, Aung San Suu Kyi needed to straddle a fine line between acquiescing to the demands of the military and pandering to the Buddhist extremist elites to maintain her base of popular support. In essence, her 'democratically' elected government was steeped in complex power dynamics, which required the NLD to submissively turn a blind eye to the brutal military and Buddhist extremist oppression and violence towards the Rohingya to maintain the semblance of a progressive democratically elected government in Myanmar.

Consequently, after the 2015 election, oppression and abuse of the Rohingya further intensified. The repression was sanitized through the auspices of a democratically elected government that represented progress into modernity for Myanmar. Through this government, the military and Buddhist mobs have had free rein to target and attack Rohingya. This renewed violence and repression in post-democratic Myanmar led to new waves of Rohingya refugees fleeing Myanmar to neighboring Bangladesh, as well as Malaysia. The exodus of the Rohingya culminated on August 25, 2017 when the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA), a militant Rohingya group, attacked police outposts, killing 12

²² Muhammad Abdul Bari, *The Rohingya Crisis: A People Facing Extinction* (Leicestershire, UK: Kube Publishing, 2018).

officers in retaliation for violence and repression aimed at the Rohingya. These killings sparked an enormous and disproportionate response resulting in a military and Buddhist extremist scorched earth response involving the torching of entire Rohingya villages, mass rapes of women and girls, and the brutal massacre of civilians including men, women, and children. According to a survey by Médecins Sans Frontières, approximately 9,400 Rohingya died in Myanmar, Rakhine state between August 25-September 24, 2017, with at least 730 of the victims being children.²³ This catastrophic loss of life took place within a month of the most recent outbreak of violence. To date, the exact numbers of Rohingya deaths from this genocidal campaign are unknown. A true and accurate number of deaths will not be definitively known until a formal international investigation into the genocide has taken place. However, estimates vary from the tens of thousands and beyond.

There has been a steady flow of Rohingya refugees to Bangladesh, Malaysia, and Indonesia since severe government crackdowns in Rakhine state in 2012. In the aftermath of the August 2017 genocide, the vast majority of Rohingya refugees fled to Cox Bazaar, Bangladesh. According to UNHCR, there are currently over 900,000 Rohingya refugees in the Kutupalong and Nayapara refugee camps in Bangladesh.²⁴ One of us (Bakali) had the opportunity to visit these camps in January 2018 and again in October 2019. During the first massive wave of refugee arrivals in 2017, aid organizations prioritized basic necessities for the refugees. These included food, shelter, and basic medical facilities. Though some progress has been made with regards to infrastructure in the camps and services offered to the Rohingya, their situation remains troubling and unsettling. They are forced to live in squalid conditions with no resolution to their situation in sight. My primary aim in visiting the Rohingya refugee camps in Bangladesh was to better understand the educational realities of Rohingya refugee children and the potential for social mobility through educational programming. The daunting reality is that the educational programming in place for Rohingya refugee children is woefully underdeveloped, administered by underqualified teachers, and highly politicized,

²³ “No One Was Left.”

²⁴ “Refugee Response in Bangladesh.”

resulting in a sense of instability for the Rohingya population. In light of this dismal reality, these questions arise: 1) Have there been similar instances in Islamic history where Muslims collectively came to the aid of oppressed communities like the Rohingya to try to improve or alleviate their situation?; 2) What can we do as Muslims in light of the crisis?; and 3) Are there examples from Islamic history that can guide our thinking?

Lessons from Muslim interventions in history

One of the most salient questions raised regarding the Rohingya refugee crisis is why Muslims, and Muslim-majority states in particular, have not supported a Muslim group that has been described as “the world’s most persecuted minority.” Several parallel situations can be identified in history, in which influential Muslims actively mobilized support for a persecuted Muslim minority.

Before discussing some examples, there are three important points to keep in mind. Firstly, comparisons can be both illustrative and blurring; they must be used carefully and anchored by the context of each situation. Secondly, principled and visionary “humanitarian” support is often enmeshed with political interests. While this is important to keep in mind, a question to consider is this: to what extent does the different intentions behind the support matter to those who actually rely upon it for their immediate survival? Finally, these comparisons are not prescriptive. For example, military intervention may have been considered an appropriate response in 9th-century Anatolia, and alluding to that event may provide moral inspiration for strong action today, but this does not necessarily imply that military intervention is an appropriate response in present-day Myanmar.

Interventions to help persecuted or, more broadly, suffering Muslims have taken different forms in history. In some instances, Muslim leadership not only took concrete actions to show solidarity with the plight of suffering Muslims but also arranged a redistribution of state resources to aid refugees. The year 639, during the era of the second Rāshidūn caliph ‘Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb, is known as *‘Ām al-Ramādah* (lit. “Year of the Ashes”). This refers to a major drought and resulting famine that affected large parts of Arabia that year. Though Madīnah itself was

significantly affected by the famine, groups of refugees streamed into the city seeking help; a refugee camp established on the outskirts of the city held up to 60,000 people.²⁵ ‘Umar made it a policy to not turn any refugees away, and to distribute the city’s limited resources as equitably as possible, even going so far as to consider pairing up all of the refugees with families in the city until the famine was over. He also suspended the prescribed punishment for stealing for the duration of the famine, considering the difficulty that both locals and refugees were experiencing.²⁶ To express his solidarity and act upon his commitment to justice, ‘Umar himself chose to eat nothing better than the food available to everyone until the famine was over. History offers many examples where such a crisis at the center of the empire was used by those at the periphery to assert their independence and pursue self-interest. However, in this case, the provinces of Syria and Egypt responded immediately by sending relief, and ‘Amr ibn al-‘Āṣ in Egypt even had a Byzantine-era canal running between Bāb al-Yūn and the Bitter Lakes revitalized so aid could be sent more quickly.²⁷ On his way to see the life-saving ships arriving at the port of al-Jār, ‘Umar announced, “Come along with us to see the ships that Allah has sent us from the land of Pharaoh.”²⁸ The crisis soon came to an end.

Other interventions came as responses to calls for retribution, justice, and coming to the aid of Muslims who were being oppressed. In the late 830s, news reached the ‘Abbasid court in Baghdad that the Byzantine emperor Theophilos had begun a campaign of harassment against Muslim garrison towns in Anatolia. Though the ‘Abbasid emperor Mu‘taṣim was preoccupied with putting down the Khurramite Rebellion, it is said (and this must be taken with a grain of salt) that one particular story from the town of Zibatra (present-day Doğanşehir) forced his hand. A Muslim woman who was being taken captive by the Byzantines had yelled

²⁵ Ali Muhammad as-Sallabi, *Umar ibn al-Khattāb: His Life and Times*, trans. Nasiruddin al-Khattab, vol. 1 (Riyadh: International Islamic Publishing House, 2007), 412.

²⁶ Istiḥan Saim Kayadibi, *The Doctrine of Juristic Preference in Islamic Law* (Kuala Lumpur: Islamic Book Trust, 2010), 120; see also Abu Amina Elias, “Umar on Hudud: Punishment of Theft Suspended During Famine,” Daily Hadith Online, <https://abuaminaelias.com/dailyhadithonline/2012/09/18/umar-hudud-suspended-famine/>.

²⁷ Gautier H. A. Juynboll, trans., *The History of al-Tabari*, vol. 13, *The Conquest of Iraq, Southwestern Persia, and Egypt: The Middle Years of ‘Umar’s Caliphate, A.D. 636–642/A.H. 15–21* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989), 158.

²⁸ Jo Van Steenberg, *Caliphate and Kingship in a Fifteenth-Century Literary History of Muslim Leadership and Pilgrimage* (Leiden: Brill, 2016), 209.

“*Wā-Mu ‘taṣīmāh*” (“O Mu‘taṣīm”), as if she was calling on the Abbasid ruler for his protection. Her action prompted mockery from her captors about whether she thought the caliph in Baghdad could hear her. Hearing this, Mu‘taṣīm reportedly replied, “*Labbayki, yā ukhta*” (“Here I am at your service, my sister”) and immediately ordered a campaign, and “forwent the pleasures of marriage-bed [...] and of sleep to answer the appeal of the Zibatrian woman.”²⁹ He personally led the campaign and sacked the city of Amorium, the birthplace of the Byzantine dynasty and one of the most important cities in their empire.

In another example, Muslim leaders were inspired to set aside their petty differences for the greater good. The jurist ‘Alī ibn Ṭāhir al-Sulamī (d. 1106) in his *Kitāb al-Jihād* (Book of Struggle) published soon after the occupation of Jerusalem in the First Crusade in 1099, inspired Nūr al-Dīn Zangī, the ruler of Damascus. Sulamī called on Muslims to recognize the crusade as more than a temporary Byzantine raid but a large-scale and far-reaching occupation carried out by “Franks.” He urged Muslim leaders to set aside “old hatreds and secret hostilities” and unite their petty local kingdoms, even suggesting that Sunnī and Ismā‘īlī Shī‘ī Muslims co-operate for the collective interests of Muslims.³⁰ Zangī adopted much of this vision and in 1168, long before Jerusalem was liberated, he had a *mimbar* (pulpit) crafted to be placed in Masjid al-Aqsa, which was used there until 1969. More importantly, Zangī passed on this vision to his protégé, Salāḥ al-Dīn Ayyūbī, who liberated Jerusalem in 1187.³¹

One of the most powerful examples of Muslim interventions in history is that of the Ottomans’ role in facilitating the survival of the Circassians and their culture during and after the Circassian Genocide (1864). In this instance, we learn how Muslim leadership supported the resettlement of refugees without forcing them to assimilate or lose their culture. A thorough analysis of this largely forgotten event in Islamic history is not possible here, but it is remarkably similar to the experience

²⁹ M. M. Badawi, “The Function of Rhetoric in Medieval Arabic Poetry: Abū Tammām’s Ode on Amorium,” *Journal of Arabic Literature* 9 (1978): 54–55; see also Abdul Malik Mujahid, *Golden Stories of Accepted Prayers* (Riyadh: Darussalam Publishers, 2013), 205.

³⁰ Abdul Rahman Azzam, *Saladin: The Triumph of the Sunni Revival* (Cambridge: Islamic Texts Society, 2014), 40–41.

³¹ Azzam, *Saladin*, 42.

of the Rohingya in our time. The Circassians (also known as the Adyghe) are one of the oldest indigenous people of the Caucasus, thought to have lived along the eastern coast of the Black Sea for the past 4,000 years. Beginning in the 17th century, large numbers of Circassians embraced Islam, likely due to the strong influence of the nearby Ottoman Empire. Many aspects of the Circassians' unique culture made them an obstacle to the expanding Russian Empire, as did their perceived loyalty to the Ottomans, the Russians' arch-rivals. In the 1860s, after defeating the famed Imam Shamil in Chechnya and Dagestan, the Russians turned their attention to eliminating the Circassians from the Caucasus.

The Russians' scorched-earth campaign focused on starving the Circassians into submission. By the winter of 1863, thousands had been driven to the shore of the Black Sea, where many died from starvation, disease, exposure, and attacks by wolves and bears. According to a conservative estimate, at least 650,000 people, or approximately half of all Circassians, were killed in the Russian campaign.³² It was left to the Ottomans to come to save the Circassians from the shore. The Ottomans petitioned the Russians to stop the campaign on humanitarian grounds, initially allowed large numbers of Circassians into Ottoman lands on the pretense that they were pilgrims on their way to Makkah and Madīnah, and in June 1864, issued a declaration encouraging the Circassians to come to the Ottoman lands in order to save their lives.³³ The Ottoman response, from the beginning, was driven by more than just humanitarian concerns and possibly added to the suffering of many Circassians. However, the intervention likely saved thousands of Circassians, as well as their culture and identity.

Despite the Ottomans' unpreparedness to handle the refugee crisis, the Circassians faced many challenges in trying to build new lives for themselves in Ottoman lands. Some were settled in the Balkans, where they again faced persecution by the Russophile regimes as the Ottomans gradually lost control of that region. This led to a refugee crisis that continued for decades; in 1878, there were 180,000 refugees

³² Walter Richmond, "Circassia: A Small Nation Lost to the Great Game," in *Hidden Genocides: Power, Knowledge, Memory*, eds. Alexander Laban Hinton, Thomas La Pointe, and Douglas Irvin-Erickson (London: Rutgers University Press, 2014), 110.

³³ Walter Richmond, *The Circassian Genocide* (London: Rutgers University Press, 2013), 90.

in Istanbul, nearly one-third of them Circassian, and the Ottoman government was “laying out a huge sum every day in order to feed these people and had to call upon charitable organizations to help supply food and clothing.”³⁴

Thousands of Circassians were resettled in the Ottoman-ruled Levant. Though they often faced discrimination due to being perceived as a burden on a region already struggling economically, there were also more hopeful signs, such as the creation of a new tax in Damascus to help resettle the refugees, and the permission given to them to operate their own courts as a way of preserving their identity and traditions.³⁵ In the 1870s, Circassian villages were established in Palestine and shortly afterward in the Golan Heights. In the Golan Heights, which had long been in ruins, the Circassians had an opportunity to show the Ottomans—and the world—their own tenacity. By 1900, the land was filled with orchards, and the city of Quneitra had become a thriving trading center. In 1907, many Circassians also found employment as part of the cavalry force guarding the Hejaz Railway line running between Damascus and Madinah, which they defended during the First World War.³⁶

The Ottomans also tried to accommodate the Circassians in the army by allowing exclusively Circassian units to be formed, led by Circassian officers. By the early 1910s, they and other Caucasian groups formed more than a quarter of the Ottoman army officers, despite being only two percent of the empire’s population.³⁷ They also found the opportunity to excel in other fields. Ahmed Mithat, known as the founding father of modern Turkish novelists and playwrights, was one such Circassian, and he created a Circassian alphabet based on the Arabic script to help ensure the survival of the language. In 1899, the Society for Circassian Unity was formed in Ottoman (though British-controlled) Cairo and documented the Circassians’ experiences. In 1908, the Circassian Solidarity Association was born in Istanbul, which was able to create a Roman-based script for the Circassian language, publish the first Circassian periodical, and open schools where

³⁴ Richmond, *Circassian Genocide*, 110.

³⁵ Richmond, *Circassian Genocide*, 118.

³⁶ Richmond, *Circassian Genocide*, 124.

³⁷ Zeynel Abidin Besleney, *The Circassian Diaspora in Turkey: A Political History* (Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2014), 55.

Circassian history and culture were taught—the period between 1908 and 1913 in the Ottoman Empire has thus been called the “Circassian Renaissance.”³⁸ The events noted in this section provide some examples of the Muslim imperative to act in such situations and gives us some sense of hope that collective action in the face of oppression of Muslim communities is possible.

Conclusion

There are almost one million Rohingya settled in refugee camps, the vast majority of them having settled in Bangladesh after violence erupted in August 2017. There are countless harrowing stories of torture and torment that haunt the inhabitants of the camps. By all reasonable estimates, what happened in Rakhine state, Myanmar was an organized extermination of an ethnic minority, and to call it anything short of genocide is willful ignorance. The systematic murder of men, women, and children solely based on their ethnicity deserves no euphemistic characterization. The extermination and genocide of the Rohingya represent the extreme consequences of years of Structural Islamophobia going unchallenged. However, instead of recounting the horrors of this tragedy, we would like to impart a message of hope. This hope glimmered past the squalor and misery of the camps. Yes, there was pain; it was brutal, raw, and unimaginable. But behind the visible and invisible scars of the survivors, there was hope beaming on the faces of the children in these camps. That hope shone brighter than any shade that could be cast by a vile military intent on destroying a people, mobs that inhumanly murder infants in front of their parents, and a government that has been complicit to these acts of barbarism and brutality. The hope on the faces of the children in those camps was the hope of the human spirit. It demonstrated that humanity, love, strength, and dignity can endure and thrive despite the despicable actions of others.

When we entered the camps, children would immediately rush to greet us, shake our hands, and welcome us with smiles on their faces. These children had no expectations of us, they were just happy to see people visiting them, who presumably had some semblance of caring for them and their plight. They did not

³⁸ Besleney, *Circassian Diaspora*, 56–58.

have their hands stretched out looking for handouts. They were dignified and gracious hosts, welcoming outsiders to their—for lack of a better word—home. They shared with us. Not their material possessions, as there was not much to share. Most of the children were running around barefoot, with some barely having enough clothing to cover their bodies. Yet, they shared with us invaluable things that nobody could take away from them: their resilience, dignity, and humanity.

The Rohingya crisis represents such a wide-scale disaster that attempts to alleviate the misery of these people can seem daunting and out of reach. However, there are small steps we can take that may have a meaningful impact. Our first recourse to action in the face of disaster should be prayer. Ultimately, Allah has power over all things and it is He Who can alleviate all pain, suffering, and hardships. Praying for our Rohingya brothers and sisters is a duty upon all of us and it is the most fundamental and basic thing we can do for them. Secondly, we should try to assist in the humanitarian efforts for the Rohingya refugees. There are numerous aid organizations that are doing amazing work on the ground in these camps. Without financial support, these organizations will not be able to provide basic necessities to the Rohingya refugees. Please find an organization that you trust and donate generously. Finally, awareness about this crisis is fundamental for any kind of meaningful change. Learn as much as you can about what is happening. By doing so you will have a stronger sense and understanding of how you can help in more meaningful ways. Knowledge is light, and it is only with light that we can extinguish the darkness of our ignorance and indifference.