

No long-term solution in sight for the Rohingya crisis

Author: Trevor Wilson, ANU > 22 September 2017



Myanmar's State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi

International media were overwhelmed at the end of August 2017 by reports of widespread attacks by Myanmar's military forces against the Rohingya population in northern Rakhine state, near Myanmar's border with Bangladesh. More than 400,000 Rohingya were reported to have fled to Bangladesh to avoid getting caught in the violence, but were reportedly turned back by the Bangladesh security authorities, or taken into detention. More than 100 are reported to have been killed in the various military operations that took place in Myanmar.

Violence in Rakhine State has occurred in the past, sometimes resulting in mass illegal movements of Rohingya into Bangladesh border areas. But this latest incident may have been the first time such violence was witnessed first-hand by international media.

State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi's defensive public statements about the Myanmar military's indiscriminate actions against the Rohingya population have also shocked many international observers. Her initial official statement on 6 September made no mention of what her government proposes to do specifically in order to remedy the Rohingya situation. Remarks a day later to the BBC about doing the best to maintain stability and to protect all people in the area are not especially reassuring. Even her formal address to the nation on 19 September avoided addressing the central issue of the legal status of the Rohingya in Myanmar.

Suu Kyi may have her own reasons for continuing cooperation with the Myanmar military in their current power-sharing arrangement, but why wouldn't she display some political leadership on behalf of the Rohingya? After all, even if an intervention by her was unsuccessful, she would be given credit for her courage and principles.

Behind the latest crisis, there is a significant new factor in the Rakhine political landscape. This is in the form of the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA), described by Suu Kyi and others as a terrorist group, and showing many of the attributes of Islamist terrorist groups elsewhere.

ARSA has declared links with the so-called Islamic State, uses crude anti-authoritarian propaganda, and shows a willingness to introduce arms into what was previously an 'unarmed political struggle'. The utterly opportunistic nature of their public profile and blatant use of ordinary Rohingya to cover for their own extremism are similarly shared attributes. The alleged destabilising role of ARSA has attracted considerable attention from intelligence agencies, with various accusations of external interference adding unnecessary complications.

Remarkably, this latest flight of the Rohingya coincided with the 24 August release of the first report by the Kofi Annan Commission on Rakhine State appointed a year earlier by Suu Kyi. Indeed, the Myanmar government has not even had time to respond to the report.

Visiting Myanmar at the time, Annan took the opportunity to reinforce his call for the Myanmar government to accept the essentially practical, but generally short-term, recommendations of his report. Not surprisingly, the report is silent on the question of how a political compromise, or consensus, on the Rohingya inside Myanmar might be struck. It is hard to believe that the timing of these incidents was absolutely unrelated to the publication of the Annan Commission report.

Many leaders in Myanmar – including perhaps Suu Kyi herself – are becoming rather exasperated with the high-minded obsession that they see international agencies displaying towards the Rohingya. The Myanmar government as well as the Myanmar military have openly objected to the one-sided statements about the condition of the Rohingya made by some United Nations representatives, apparently influenced by the more vigorous campaigns by rights groups in recent years.

These campaigns may have considerable justification, as the Rohingya have long received dreadful treatment by the majority Burmese. But the insensitivity of the campaigns has certainly provoked Buddhist extremists, as well as disconcerting others.

Some in Myanmar have also been upset when atrocities documented against Rohingya in neighbouring countries seem to be glossed over. It is well known in Myanmar that popular attitudes towards Rohingya in Bangladesh are also not positive.

But these reactions cannot excuse the wilful discrimination that has been practised against Rohingya in Myanmar without reason, for many decades or generations. Nor do they justify Myanmar not according basic civil rights to Rohingya, such as the right to citizenship or the right to seek permanent residence.

The Myanmar National Security Adviser's undertaking that any Rohingya holding Myanmar citizenship who fled to Bangladesh for their safety could return to Myanmar was intended to be a deterrent rather than being generous. Suu Kyi's 19 September address repeated the commitment to take back Rohingya whose previous presence in Myanmar could be verified.

Moderate and reasonable as the Annan Commission recommendations are, it might be too much to expect the Myanmar Government to do much about them, given its apparent lack of interest in finding any true resolution for the Rohingya, involving progress on citizenship rights.

In these circumstances, Suu Kyi's 19 September commitment to ensure Muslim residents of Rakhine could access socio-economic and development benefits are important, even if her reluctance to offer a better long-term deal for the Rohingya remains something of a mystery. Expediting implementation of these programs will require international assistance, but will ensure all Rakhine residents experience a 'peace dividend'.

The likely result of leaving the Myanmar military to deal with an extremist armed group in its own way, while in accordance with Myanmar's constitution, is the creation of yet another insurgency. If this is Suu Kyi's reasoning, it is driven by largely unfounded fears about national 'cohesion' and offers no hope of any negotiated outcome. It does nothing to break the military's long-lasting but unproductive and cruel dominance in Rakhine State.

International leaders visiting Myanmar immediately after the latest incidents only reinforced impressions of the international community's inability to have any impact on the situation, at least under current conditions. Visiting Indonesian Foreign Minister, Retno Marsudi, could offer no real assistance. Also visiting Myanmar in the same week, Indian Prime Minister Modi could only repeat in general terms longstanding, but still unfulfilled, promises of development assistance to Rakhine State.

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Rohingya repatriation destined to fail

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Violence against the Rohingya population in Myanmar's Rakhine State continues to draw the world's attention. More than [727,000 Rohingyas](#) have fled from Myanmar to neighbouring Bangladesh since August 2017 to escape the Myanmar army's brutal campaign to reinstate 'stability' in Rakhine. The large influx of refugees is creating enormous pressure on Bangladesh, politically and economically.

The Rohingya crisis is not new. The effects of the pervasive human rights violations perpetrated against the Rohingya Muslims in Rakhine State have been negatively affecting [Myanmar-Bangladesh relations](#) for over four decades. Both governments have held a [series of talks](#) to find a solution to the recent escalation of the crisis. So far this effort has failed.

The government of Bangladesh led by Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina decided to open its border to the Rohingya in late August 2017. Hasina was concerned about how her response to the crisis would affect her prospects for re-election, with general elections tentatively scheduled at the time for late 2018 or early 2019. Later, the despair of the Rohingya population persuaded the government that opening its border was the right course of action. It was an audacious move. Mainstream British media started to refer to Prime Minister Hasina as ['the Mother of Humanity'](#).

The international community, including the United Nations, has voiced its opposition to the Myanmar government's handling of the Rohingya crisis. During the early days of the Rohingya exodus in 2017, the Myanmar government was reluctant to talk about repatriation. After facing pressure on several fronts, the government began working with Bangladesh to devise a repatriation plan. A bilateral agreement was signed on 23 November 2017 and the Joint Working Group (JWG) – a group of representatives from Bangladesh and Myanmar dedicated to overseeing the repatriation effort – was established a month later.

But progress on repatriation has been unsatisfactory. With the support of Asia's two major powers, India and China, the Myanmar government has been able to remain largely silent about repatriation.

Both India and China have business interests in Myanmar. China is [Myanmar's biggest trading partner](#) and biggest source of foreign direct investment. India, too, is [developing its trade relations](#) with Myanmar in pursuit of its 'Look/Act East' policy. Although a good friend of the Bangladesh government, New Delhi has not made its stance about the Rohingya crisis clear. What is clear is that leaders in India and China are unlikely to put too much pressure on the Myanmar government with respect to repatriation.

So what does the future hold for the **Rohingya refugees**?

One significant development is that Myanmar and Bangladesh have held multiple JWG meetings and visits, and through these produced a repatriation agreement in January 2018. According to the agreement, 1500 Rohingya were to be repatriated daily and all 'eligible' refugees were to be sent back to their homeland within two years.

But the international community expressed deep concern about two provisions of the agreement – 'eligibility' and 'time-frame'. Since the Rohingya still do not have access to citizenship in Rakhine State under Myanmar's 1982 Citizenship Law, it would not be possible for them to prove their eligibility for repatriation. They would also have to prove that they fled from Myanmar after 9 October 2016, and National Verification Cards would only be issued to those repatriated refugees who qualify under this near impossible criterion. Eligibility issues aside, it would take more than 10 years to complete the repatriation process at the agreed rate.

The government of Bangladesh handed over an initial list of 8000 qualified refugees more than six months ago. Unfortunately, the process of repatriation has been halted several times. On the day designated for repatriation to begin in November, the first group of refugees refused to go back on the grounds that they would not yet be safe.

Rohingya repatriation is unlikely to commence in the near future. The situation will not improve until the international community, including India and China, support Bangladesh on this issue. The Bangladesh government should strengthen diplomatic initiatives with India and China as well as the United States and Russia in an effort to convince them to support the government's **five-point proposal** to resolve the crisis. With elections now set to take place on 30 December, it will remain a difficult task for a new Bangladeshi government to maintain, accelerate or potentially redesign the policy initiatives aimed at addressing this ongoing struggle.

For the Rohingya people, their lives remain heavily restricted and reliant on humanitarian aid. They still require written permission from government officials to leave the camps, including to go to an external hospital. Solving the Rohingya crisis is of the utmost importance for the sake of the Bangladeshi government, the international community and most critically for the Rohingya people themselves.

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<https://www.eastasiaforum.org/2017/12/06/unpacking-the-politics-of-rohingya-repatriation/>

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Economics, Politics and Public Policy in East Asia and the Pacific

Unpacking the politics of Rohingya repatriation

Authors: Justine Chambers and Gerard McCarthy, ANU > 6 December 2017



On 23 November, an [agreement](#) was reached between Myanmar and Bangladesh on the repatriation of Rohingya refugees. The Rohingya exodus from Myanmar's western Rakhine State now numbers almost one million people. More than 620,000 arrived in Bangladesh over the last three months following brutal military 'clearance operations' targeting a Rohingya militant group, the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army. The agreement reached last week raises fundamental questions about the viability of repatriation in the absence of a genuine path to social and political integration.

The flight of Rohingya since August 2017 constitutes the largest movement of people in mainland Southeast Asia since the Indochinese crisis in the 1970s. Both the [United Nations](#) and the [United States](#) have declared the treatment of Rohingya people to be an example of 'ethnic cleansing'. [Fearful](#) of the international community invoking the 'responsibility to protect' in response to these alleged war-crimes, Myanmar's civilian government has reinforced their commitment to repatriation up to the rate of [100–150 people per day](#).

Leaving aside the fact that repatriation at this rate would take more than 10 years to complete, the viability of this agreement is challenged by the repeated unwillingness of the Myanmar military to support the recommendations of the Kofi Annan Commission. One of the central planks of that [report](#) – which was commissioned by State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi – is the need for a path to citizenship and political inclusion for Myanmar's Rohingya community.

Since General Ne Win's military coup in 1962, successive military governments have framed themselves as the protectors of Myanmar's official '[national races](#)' ideology which fuses indigeneity and legal citizenship. Over time the Rohingya have become the target of legal discrimination and social exclusion – they are labelled 'illegal Bengalis' and '[terrorists](#)'. This is a process enabled by the 1982 Citizenship Act which effectively renders them stateless.

Despite the transition to partial civilian rule in 2011, Myanmar's military constitutionally retains control over the Ministry of Home Affairs, the Ministry of Defence and the Ministry of Border Affairs, which are the operative ministries in the context of the current crisis. As a result, even though Myanmar's civilian leaders have committed to implementing the [recommendations](#) of the Annan Commission, the military has continued to [rebuff](#) the idea, as it challenges the official conception of 'national races' of which the military frames itself as guardian.

These civil–military tensions were exposed most dramatically in late October during the first attempt to negotiate a deal on repatriation with Bangladesh. Despite initial indications from Myanmar's civilian leaders that the agreement would include a commitment to the Annan Commission recommendations, the clause was removed from the document presented to the Bangladesh representative by Myanmar's Minister for Home Affairs. As a result, [only agreements on security and border cooperation](#) were initially signed.

The latest agreement on repatriation makes mention of the Annan Commission but does not mention a path to citizenship for the Rohingya. Myanmar's civilian Minister for Social Welfare has [described plans](#) to repatriate refugees initially to camps and later to 'model villages' with the support of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, India and China. But it is [unclear](#) if Annan's recommendations on citizenship and political inclusion will be actioned.

Even if repatriation could assure safety for refugees, proving prior residency in Myanmar as required by the agreement could be difficult for those who were [never issued residency documentation](#) or lost it while fleeing the latest violence. These tensions raise serious questions about the viability of a voluntary repatriation process.

There are currently over one million Rohingya refugees living in the south-eastern districts of Cox's Bazaar and Teknaf in makeshift settlement camps, where disease and malnutrition are rife. Non-governmental organisations providing aid to the latest influx of Rohingya have emphasised that the humanitarian need – especially in basic water, sanitation and healthcare infrastructure – is immense.

In the initial wake of the latest Rohingya exodus, Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina met with refugees and committed to providing protection in the short-term. Bangladesh is not a signatory to the [1951 Refugee Convention](#), nor to its [1967 Protocol](#). Indeed, in an attempt to avoid legal obligations, Bangladesh refuses to acknowledge the Rohingya as 'refugees', instead using the nomenclature '[forcibly displaced Myanmar citizens](#)'. Bangladesh's official policy towards the Rohingya since August has emphasised repatriation. But even if some refugees elect to exercise their right to return, there is [little evidence](#) to suggest that the appropriate protection mechanisms will be put in place to secure citizenship, basic rights and protection from further violence and persecution.

Other solutions beyond repatriation must therefore be considered. Over the last two decades, refugee advocates have **stressed** the need to focus on integration in host contexts. While local integration has been rebuffed by the Bangladeshi Government, the large settlements of Rohingya people already living in the surrounding areas mean that informal integration is already occurring.

Cox's Bazar is not only a densely populated district, but one of the poorest regions in the country. Competition for space and resources is escalating. International assistance to strengthen healthcare, housing and education capacity in the Cox's Bazaar region is essential to offset these strains and improve outcomes for both local people and refugees.

Third-country resettlement mechanisms also need to be considered. If only a fraction of Rohingya take the option of exit through people-smuggling networks, a regional refugee crisis far larger than 2015 is likely. A joint resettlement mechanism, possibly coordinated through ASEAN, is essential. Caught between Bangladesh and Myanmar, legitimate alternatives are needed for Rohingya unconvinced by repatriation.

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<https://www.eastasiaforum.org/2017/10/07/myanmars-minority-strife/>

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Economics, Politics and Public Policy in East Asia and the Pacific

Myanmar's minority strife

Author: David I Steinberg, Georgetown University > 7 October 2017

Since independence in 1948, Myanmar has experienced multiple ethnic rebellions. As the Cold War ended and the internally stabilising effect of international confrontation faded, this already fragmented state, along with other countries, experienced new ethno-religious pressures. These pressures grew over time, and the reformist government under President Thein Sein (2011-16) finally recognised that to hold the state together, there was a need for some form of federalism and a degree of local authority previously absent under centralised control.



The term 'federalism' had been anathema to the military, which since 1963 had said it was the first step toward minority secession.

The move to federalism, however disparate, did indeed lead to increased ethnic recognition and self-awareness. It included the internal redrawing and reinterpretation of the bounds of each group's cultural history, linguistics and religion, reflecting strong feelings of vulnerability against the onslaught or fear of majority prominence.

This cultural vulnerability was evident not only among ethnic and religious minorities, but also among the two-thirds majority Burman (Bamah) population. This has become manifest, among other situations, in two related but separate movements: in an anti-Muslim sentiment among the Burmans and in virulent antipathy and eventual military confrontations with and against the Rohingya Muslim minority peoples along the Bangladesh frontier.

Non-Rohingya Muslims are scattered throughout the country in urban centres and along communications routes. They are said to constitute some 4 per cent of the population, but this may be underestimated.

The Burmans feel they have been economically exploited by the Muslims in business, and the latter believe they have suffered severe discrimination by the Burmans. There are no Muslims (or Christians) ranked as colonel or above in the military. The latter are also said to have birth rates higher than the majority group.

This Burman fear and vulnerability has led to anti-Muslim movements, informal boycotts of Muslim shops, legislation limiting Buddhist conversions to Islam and the size of Muslim families, and monogamy. The cry is that as Muslims overwhelmed Buddhists in India (Buddhism's home where it has essentially disappeared), they will do the same in Myanmar.

But the most severe problem, which has generated regional and even [global concerns](#), has been the plight of the Rohingya minority. The Rohingya are a group of about a million Muslims on the Myanmar side of the border with Bangladesh, and they are identified by the government and the Burman majority as 'foreigners' – illegal Bengalis who do not belong in the state.

Even the term 'Rohingya' is rejected by the state, for if they are identified as an internal ethnic group they would automatically be qualified for citizenship under the 1982 citizenship law.

The Rohingya are the most deprived of any group in East Asia. They fled Burmese police harassment and violence across the frontier in the 1970s and again in the 1990s – over 200,000 in each instance. Many were returned under UN auspices.

The Rohingya claim to have been resident in the region for centuries, and there is evidence that some Muslims have indeed done so. But the government claims that they immigrated when Burma under the British was a province of India until 1937, during [fighting in World War II](#) and finally during the war for Bangladesh independence.

The modern militarisation of the Rohingya problem began in October 2016 with a very modest Rohingya raid on the Burmese military. Repression followed and the problems mushroomed with coordinated Rohingya attacks by the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army on military bases in the region on 25 August 2017. Some observers charged Saudi and Pakistani involvement.

The military's response was disproportionate to the threat, and it forced over half a million Rohingya to flee to Bangladesh. Over 200 villages were burned. Evidence abounds for these events, though the number of deaths is undocumented.

The most recent attacks took place the day after a [special inquiry panel](#) led by former UN secretary-general Kofi Annan reported on earlier incidents and offered recommendations for alleviation of the situation.

Nobel Laureate, State Counsellor and Foreign Minister Aung San Suu Kyi, brought together the diplomatic community in Naypyitaw to explain the situation on 19 September. She effectively sidestepped the issue of military violence, misstated some facts and further diminished her international role as an icon of democracy – a title she claims she does not want but in which she seemingly revels.

No matter how much the local population might have applauded the content when it was released, it had the opposite impact on the foreign community to what was intended; It further increased international suspicions about the Burmese military and reduced whatever modest international hope may have existed for amelioration of the problems.

Aung San Suu Kyi is only in charge of part of a dual government. Through her political party (the National League for Democracy) she controls the legislature, but she lacks the power to amend the constitution. The military controls the army and police forces, the intelligence community, minority affairs, and administration down to the local level.

There is little if any trust between these two groups and their leaders. Aung San Suu Kyi herself has not vigorously attempted to build such confidence, instead confronting and attempting to outflank the military.

She cannot confront the military directly, and thus is in a most difficult position. If she goes too far, the [constitution](#) provides for a military takeover. If she avoids confrontation, she loses international support. In either case, the Rohingya suffer.

Though Aung San Suu Kyi has claimed that the ‘peace process’ – the resolution of minority rebellions – is her highest priority, the outlook is dubious at the national level and remains even more grim and intractable in Rohingya regions. International confidence in her administration, in foreign investment, and in the future of a democratic transition – always difficult in any state undergoing change – are now even more hazy.

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<https://www.eastasiaforum.org/2018/12/27/old-wounds-fresh-denial-in-myanmar/>

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Economics, Politics and Public Policy in East Asia and the Pacific

Old wounds, fresh denial in Myanmar

Author: David I Steinberg, Georgetown University > 27 December 2018

Myanmar’s year was framed by the horrific residues of 2017 – the flight from death and destruction of over 700,000 Muslim Rohingya refugees, the largest tragic migration in modern Asian history, and Myanmar’s denial of responsibility for the situation. The Rohingya exodus was fuelled internally by the rise of religious ethno-nationalism, which continues to hold back proposed solutions to the crisis and to the myriad of ethnic rebellions that have been the state’s hallmark since independence in 1948. The international repercussions of Myanmar’s ethnic cleansing and [minority strife](#) reach far beyond the Bay of Bengal.



The Burmese armed forces (known as the Tatmadaw) regard their sweep through Rohingya border townships as a justified security response to what was in fact the attacks of a few, poorly armed insurgents. The civilian administration under State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi, fearful of inciting the wrath of the Tatmadaw and the possibility that it may revert to a policy of pure control, continues to issue meaningless platitudes in response to foreign concerns.

The complexities of the situation transcend a clear-cut Muslim–Buddhist disparity. The Buddhist Rakhine (provincial) people were conquered in 1784 and have been treated as second-class citizens by the majority Buddhist Burmans ever since. They resent the outpouring of foreign assistance to the Rohingya, claiming with considerable accuracy that they, the Buddhists of Rakhine,

are among the poorest people in Myanmar. They consider themselves vulnerable, as do the other minorities that comprise one-third of the total population of the state. But minorities vary. Those considered *taing-yin-tha* (sons of the country) are automatic citizens, while the Rohingya are denied that status. Even the use of the term “Rohingya” implies such ethnic standing and thus is publicly decried by the government.

Although agreements have been reached between [Myanmar and Bangladesh](#) on the question of repatriation (supposedly to begin in 2019), this is more theatre than reality. Most Rohingya are fearful of returning to what is, at best, second-class status – education, health services, occupational choices and even internal travel are either denied or restricted.

The United Nations has called the exodus ‘genocide’. But it is ‘ethnic cleansing’, which by definition indicates that the Myanmar government would be pleased if the Rohingya did not return. Bangladesh is reluctant to have them remain. Some are advocating placing the Rohingya on an island in the Bay of Bengal subject to the annual devastating typhoons that blow in from the south.

Expressions of ethno-nationalism, both by the Burman majority and the minorities themselves, produce both mythic histories and an existential fear of the loss of identity. Although Buddhists make up 88 per cent of the country’s total population, some fear that this will not last and the majority religion may soon be replaced by another, as happened in Buddhism’s original home of India. The general population, clearly anti-Muslim but more virulently anti-Rohingya, is strongly supportive of both the Tatmadaw and the civilian administration’s position.

The previously strong Western support of the ‘quasi-civilian’ government of Aung San Suu Kyi has eroded. Her public responses to the crisis indicate either an incomprehensible lack of understanding of the atrocities that have occurred or her complicity in their internal cover-up.

Criticism of the West by the Burmese state has been widespread, and with it has come the resurgence of a closer relationship with China. China effectively supports the Tatmadaw’s position on the Rohingya, perhaps to take advantage of the space opened up by the United States’ and the European Union’s declining domestic reputations. But perhaps also to decry any pro-Muslim sentiment that could impinge on China’s own attempts to quell Muslim discontent in its northwestern region of Xinjiang.

China also has major economic interests in the Rakhine region – oil and gas pipelines, and the development of a major port and industrial zone at Kyaukphyu (although these are not in Rohingya areas). The Chinese Belt and Road initiative in Myanmar will further solidify China’s national interests and its ties with Myanmar.

Although the Rohingya flight has dominated the news, fighting in the north along the Chinese frontier by Kachin, Shan and other minorities has stalled Suu Kyi’s efforts to resuscitate the country’s ‘[Panglong peace process](#)’ – an attempt to solve the country’s long-festered Burman–minority relations. China wants a settlement of the border region rebellions for its own economic and political interests, but it does not want Western involvement or presence on its periphery.

The sterling possibilities for development in Myanmar – a potential beacon of investment and tourism – have been severely compromised by the Rohingya tragedy, and the state’s and Suu Kyi’s falling reputations. For many in the West, Suu Kyi personified the country and its democratic ideals. Although popular at home, her stellar international reputation was built by the West. And it is now being destroyed by the West.

No solution is in sight. As the 2020 elections draw closer, there is no indication that either the Tatmadaw or Suu Kyi and her National League for Democracy will temper their attitudes toward the Rohingya. These attitudes reflect prevailing, albeit prejudiced, internal winds in Myanmar.

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This article is part of an EAF [special feature series](#) on 2018 in review and the year ahead

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