

**ISS Risk Special Report:
Myanmar Terrorism Risk Review – September, 2016
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Abstract

In this instalment of ISS Risk's series regarding the strategy and expansion of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) in Southeast Asia, we address the state of Myanmar. At first glance, this may seem counterintuitive, as there have been no attacks conducted by ISIS within Myanmar, and very little attention directed towards the country by ISIS. With significant international attention directed recently towards the plight of the Muslim Rohingya population in Myanmar, this has begun to change, with several jihadist groups making public denunciations of Myanmar, as well as encouraging the Rohingya to take up jihad to defend their communities. At the time this report was being written (August 2016), Myanmar's star stateswoman Aung San Suu Kyi's name had just been included on an assassination list sent to a Malaysian police station by purported ISIS allegiants inside Malaysia.

Thus far, Myanmar has been largely immune to jihadism, likely due to the intense persecution directed towards its Rohingya Muslim population, as well as an extensive state intelligence apparatus. Although ISIS has almost certainly identified the Rohingya as an at-risk population vulnerable to jihadist proselytising due to the abysmal treatment suffered at the hands of the Myanmar government and far-right Buddhist nationalist groups, the Rohingya themselves may not be particularly receptive to violent jihad. In general, public statements by Rohingya societal groups seek recognition and citizenship within the state of Myanmar and publically espouse non-violence in the face of persecution.

This is not to say that some groups do not pursue armed struggle as an avenue for recognition, because there are several that continue to wage a low-intensity insurgency against the state of Myanmar. However, the relocation of most Rohingya to refugee camps and tight state control of the Rohingya communities has blunted the efforts of most Muslim militants. The groups that continue to wreak the most havoc are groups without Islamic influence.

In short, at first glance it would seem the ground is fertile for ISIS infiltration and expansion within Myanmar; especially given recent upticks in the group's activity within Bangladesh. Upon deeper analysis, however, Myanmar may be a disappointment for ISIS strategic planners, there is more leeway for growth for them in Naples, Munich or Islington!

Muslims in Myanmar

Of a population of approximately 54 million, Muslims make up only about 4% of the total population, which is predominately Buddhist. There are several Muslim ethnic groups within Myanmar, but the group likely most vulnerable to ISIS persuasion is the Rohingya ethnic group, which is mostly confined to Rakhine State, bordered by Bangladesh in the North and the Bay of Bengal along its western border. Estimates of Rohingya numbers in Rakhine State range from one hundred thousand to over one million, though hundreds of thousands have attempted to flee the country by boat to Indonesia, Thailand, and Malaysia, perishing by the hundreds and thousands at sea. The Rohingyas have been denied citizenship in Myanmar for decades, and have recently been increasingly vocal in demanding citizenship within Myanmar, citing many generations of residency as proof of their native status.

The official position of the Myanmar government, even under the new National League for Democracy, has been to refer to the Rohingya as the ‘Muslim community of Rakhine State’ and has denied their requests for citizenship, claiming that the Rohingyas are simply illegal immigrants from Bangladesh. Many Buddhist citizens refer to the Rohingyas as simply ‘Bengalis’ and loudly maintain that they will not accept the idea of citizenship being offered to the Rohingyas. Refugee camps have been established for the Rohingyas, who have fled to the border area from their traditional communities in the face of state-sponsored persecution. These camps are reportedly in terrible conditions and residents cannot leave without permission given by the military that controls all access. Given the Rohingyas’ desire to be accepted by the state and their lack of freedom of movement, they are unlikely to be susceptible to ISIS propaganda in the near term. Though, perhaps most importantly, is the absolute certainty of an ethnic cleansing against their population in the event that the Rohingyas perpetuate a terrorist act against Buddhists that makes ISIS (and violence in general) extremely unappealing.

Status of major armed groups

Myanmar’s federal system has been wracked by decades of ethnic warfare following dissolution of the 1947 Panglong Agreement and subsequent efforts by the Tatmadaw to bring rebelling states to heel. Most ethnic militias, and there is a plethora of them, an estimated 18 groups with diverse orientations and capabilities, operate outside the Ayerwaddy Basin and are engaged in running their own proto-states in the hinterlands of Myanmar. No major combat organizations in Myanmar espouse Islamist ideologies and would almost certainly reject potential alliance with ISIS. A short description of the two most significant ethnic militias follows.

United Wa State Army (UNWSA)

Composed of defectors of the now-defunct Communist Party of Burma, created in 1989, the UWSA is the largest military force next to the Burmese Army, and the most significant threat to state sovereignty in Myanmar; however, the UWSA is not known to use terrorist tactics or target civilians in government-controlled areas. The UWSA is estimated to maintain a fighting force of up to 20,000 in Shan State and is known to possess heavy weapons and sophisticated military vehicles, including Mi-17 helicopters. The Wa are not affiliated with Islam and would not be a candidate for any kind of co-option by ISIS. The group is an ethno nationalist organisation with a primary desire to establish an autonomous 'Wa State' in the north east of the country. The group finances itself from the drugs trade in the golden triangle, weapons smuggling and a broad range of criminal activities. The Wa are ethnically Chinese and draw support clandestinely from China, but at times not so covert.

Kachin Independence Army

The KIA is the second largest non-state actor in Myanmar and maintains the second-largest ethnic militia. Most violent conflict between the KIA and Tatmadaw is confined to the Kachin State, particularly near the Chinese border where they command up to 10,000 active rebels and similar numbers in reserve. They are the military wing of the Kachin Independence Organisation (KIO). Essentially the conflict in the region is rooted in economics and the access to exploitation of the vast natural resources.

Although the organisation is divided in some respects, in the orientation of the conflict, with many in the KIA claiming to fight for an independent state in Kachin. The established ceasefire between the KIO and the government essentially broke down in 2011 when the military attacked a key KIA out post near the Chinese border. Much of the sustained conflict now is really about the control of resources, smuggling rat lines for jade, gold and rare expensive timbers. Naturally the same lines are exploited for drugs, human trafficking and black market activities.

The KIA is currently negotiating with the government of Myanmar regarding an improved federal relationship, amid renewed fighting over the last few years. Although the KIA are predominately Christian and would be extremely unlikely to tolerate any ISIS activity inside Kachin State if ISIS were fool hardy enough to even try, they have strong ethnic Chinese influences and China evidently has interests in the region and thus in the group as it does with others.

Status of Islamist groups

There are several armed Muslim groups that operate occasionally within Myanmar, most notably the Rohingya Solidarity Organization (RSO), the Arakan Rohingya National Organization (ARNO), and the purported Arakan Mujahedeen. Operational groups formerly took advantage of the porosity of the Myanmar-Bangladesh border to stage operations and obtain safe haven; however increased state control of the border areas, as well as a tight grip on the Muslim communities has decreased the operational utility of the area. In fact, only 2 of 154 reported terrorist attacks in Myanmar between 2001 and 2015 are suspected as perpetrated by Rohingya groups, more specifically the RSO. These attacks were confined to Rakhine State and were directed toward Tatmadaw and Border Guard forces.

RSO

The RSO came into existence in the 1980's as an armed branch of a Rohingya political organization advocating for inclusion in the state of Myanmar. Operating largely from inside Bangladesh, the group has been severely degraded by direct action by the Bangladeshi military and Tatmadaw and today retains very little actual operational capability.

ARNO

The case of ARNO is particularly interesting, as there have been zero terrorist attacks in Myanmar directly attributed to ARNO since 2001, but the Burmese government made significant efforts to establish notional links between ARNO and both al-Qaeda and the Taliban. After the 11 September 2001 attacks in the United States, the Burmese government provided information linking ARNO to AQ and the Taliban, as well as to ethnic separatist militias along the Myanmar-Thailand border. The accuracy of these reports is unconfirmed and, although deemed plausible by their American recipients, was likely intended to blunt international response to heavy-handed attacks on the Rohingya under the auspices of supporting the U.S. Global War on Terror.

Arakan Mujahedeen (AM)

Status of the Arakan Mujahedeen is difficult to ascertain with any degree of exactness. Stemming from statements made by Pakistani-based terrorists in 2013, as well as video footage, claims were circulated of a terrorist unit composed of Bangladeshis, Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) members, Indonesians and Burmese. This group claimed to conduct significant attacks against Myanmar's Tatmadaw and Buddhist citizens, but little supporting

evidence exists. Harakat-ul-Jihad-al-Islami, a Pakistan-based terrorist group, also claimed to be directly supporting a terrorist unit operating in Myanmar.

Outside Influence

Al-Shabaab (AS)

In 2015, al-Shabaab released a statement to the Muslim populations of Bangladesh, Indonesia, Thailand and Malaysia exhorting them to "take the pivotal role in alleviating the suffering of the Muslims in Myanmar (Burma)." In addition to demanding that the states protect Rohingyas fleeing the state, the AS spokesman invited Muslims in Southeast Asia to "Mobilise men, money, and resources to defend the honour of the persecuted Muslims and repel the savage attacks of the polytheists." Given that AS has no operational reach beyond the African continent, it is likely that these comments would not pose any threat beyond potentially encouraging local actors.

Tehreek-e-Taliban (TTP)

Pakistan's Tehreek-e-Taliban released a statement in 2012 in reference to sectarian violence in Myanmar's Rakhine state which was raging at the time, stating that the Pakistani government should cut relations with the Myanmar government, "Otherwise we (TTP) will not only attack Burmese interests anywhere but will also attack the Pakistani fellows of Burma one by one." Given that four years have passed since the issuance of these comments with no resulting attacks, it is unlikely that the TTP has any aspirations for action within Myanmar. TTP has also released more recent statements encouraging the Rohingya to adopt violent jihad to defend themselves; however, given the beleaguered position of the Rohingya, there are unlikely to be significant attacks without considerable outside support.

The Afghan Taliban, Lashkar-e-Taiba, members of Jemaah Islamiyah, and others have given lip service to supporting jihad inside Myanmar and some have even claimed to be fundraising for attacks and training to be conducted by Rohingyas; however, little-to-no operational activity has actually taken place due to the general propensity among Myanmar's Muslim's for non-violence.

Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS)

At this time, ISIS cannot be described as having anything greater than an aspirational or potential interest in Myanmar. There has not been credible indication of operational interest in accessing Myanmar, nor has there been observed effort at targeting the at-risk Muslim

populations in Myanmar. Although the Rohingya community certainly has exploitable grievances, their desire to obtain citizenship within a federal Myanmar will likely preclude significant cooperation with ISIS. The very real threat of mass collective punishment by both Buddhist Nationalists and the Tatmadaw will likely also curb any real cooperation between the Rohingya and ISIS.

Present state of affairs

Aung San Suu Kyi

Aung San Suu Kyi requires special attention, because she is powerful enough and popular enough with the people to sway the country in the way she wishes. Aung San Suu Kyi has been a leading figure in the Burmese political spectrum since the late 1980s. At 71 years of age, she is Myanmar's greatest voice for democracy. Having continued her fight despite being placed on house arrest by the military for 15 years, she has gained international acclaim, receiving many honours including a Nobel Peace Prize. Today, Aung San Suu Kyi is the State Counsellor, Foreign Minister, and Minister of the President's Office.

Even with such international notoriety, Suu Kyi is very much in line with the rest of the government as well as the Burmese people when it comes to the issue of the Rohingyas. She remained silent during the 2012 Rakhine State riots and again during the 2015 Rohingya refugee crisis. Following a meeting with top leaders in India, she told an Indian news channel that violence has been committed on both sides of the conflict and she hopes the Buddhist and Muslims will be able to reconcile. Though, Suu Kyi has also expressed her uncertainty about whether or not the Rohingya can be regarded as Burmese citizens and stressed that illegal border crossings from Bangladesh must be stopped.

Suu Kyi's stance on varying political issues provides credible insight into the initiatives and matters that the Burmese government are and will continue to prioritise in the coming years. With her and the President's reluctance to recognise the Rohingya people it seems unlikely that the Rakhine State will receive any productive help from the government. In terms of ISIS' threat to Myanmar, tighter borders between the country and Bangladesh would complicate movement and further quell their efforts to spur the discriminated Rohingyas towards jihad.

As will be discussed in sections that follow, Suu Kyi plays a leading role in multiple efforts for peace and stability in the country.

National Ceasefire Accord (NCA)

In its 68th year, Myanmar has the world's longest running ongoing civil war. Over half the states in the country have been affected by fighting in the past two decades. Kayah, Kayin, Kachin, Shan and Rakhine states have generally seen the most violence. Over a dozen ethnic groups have been fighting to preserve their autonomy against the strong-handed, dominant ethnic Bamar majority – most of whom adhere to Buddhism.

In October 2015, eight armed ethnic groups signed a ceasefire agreement with the government. With seven groups declining to sign or not even invited to do so, including some of the largest (KIA, United Wa State Army, and Shan State Army), it is often dismissed as a stunt by the military government preceding the national election. Fighting continued and, in some places, it intensified.

It was just recently, in August 2016, that non-signatory armed groups raised a proposal to sign the NCA. Neither the proposal itself nor the discussions about it have been disclosed to the public but were planned to be further negotiated at this year's Peace Conference. However, days before the conference began on 31 August, forces clashed in Kachin and Shan States, and three of the seven groups were banned from attending the Conference. At this time of writing the government claims the potential peace deal is ongoing.

21st Century Panglong (Peace Conference)

Aung San Suu Kyi is leading the peace conference, which (as mentioned above) opened on Wednesday, 13 August 2016. More than 750 delegates attended the opening ceremony. This is the first time since the country's independence that factions from the government, various political parties, parliament, the military, and armed ethnic groups have gathered together in an effort to end the country's long running violent struggles.

Considering the vast scope of participants, the mere existence of this conference should be applauded. It is the first indicator that all sides are willing to negotiate to end the civil war. Unfortunately, however, the likeliness of anything substantial or significant coming out of the conference seems quite low. Participants have complained that the event has been rushed and that too much attention is being given to Suu Kyi's party. Apparently, Suu Kyi set the date for the conference without consulting major participants and against the request of armed groups to delay until October.

Members of the Panglong Conference's central committee have said that more peace talks are planned for after the conference as well as another peace conference scheduled for six

months from now. Beyond political means, all parties involved will have to discuss how to share natural resources, when the armed groups will lay down their weapons, and whether some militants would be merged into a national army force. The scheduling of another peace conference before Panglong even ends indicates that the government is not confident that any peaceful agreements will be made any time soon.

Rakhine Commission

In light of criticism from the international community, Aung San Suu Kyi has recently created a new Rakhine Commission to analyse the situation in the state and provide recommendations on how to reduce tensions and promote development in the area. There have been initiatives in the past, but they have failed. This commission asserts its success will come from the inclusion of three foreigners on the nine-person team. However, the decision for Kofi Annan, the former UN Secretary General, to lead the commission has been highly protested by Buddhist hardliners who feel that foreign agencies give preferential treatment to the Muslim population. Interestingly, it has also been protested by Rakhine state locals because they question a foreigner's ability to truly know and understand the feelings of the people in Rakhine state.

Despite the protests, the commission is moving forward. Annan has already met with and plans to continue meetings with religious, political, and community leaders of the state. He stresses that stability and economic development go hand in hand. This stance will of course affect the Commission's final recommendations for the issue. That said, it is the word *recommendation* that needs to be highlighted. Realistically speaking, the commission has no true power to implement changes in the state. They will conclude what they believe is necessary to end the discrimination and oppression of the Rohingya people in the Rakhine state, but it is the government that must drive such changes – and, thinking historically, the Muslim minority are unlikely to be prioritised to the level necessary to see changes realised.

Lifting of US sanctions

Interestingly, during September 2016, the US announced that they were lifting all economic sanctions against the Myanmar government. One can only imagine this decision has been made in light of the perceived 'democratic reforms' taking place in the country over the past couple of years. However, the morality and rationale for such a decision must be questioned in light of the ongoing localised conflicts and in particular the continuous treatment of the Muslim minority group – the Rohingyas. This section of society is still suffering terrible and blatant sectarian and ethnic abuses and glaring human rights abuses, yet the US

administration has unilaterally decided that things have improved in the country to the extent that the world at large can now economically engage with the still military dominated and directed government. It is hypocritical that different values or benchmarks of human rights abuses are patently being employed to coerce or punish different countries in the Asian region.

Conclusion

The evidence on Myanmar when debating whether or not ISIS expansion will occur in the area is quite clear. As shown above, the overtone (and undertone) of Buddhist nationalism across the country will likely quash any Muslim influence that begins to stick. Although a few have, generally, the most persecuted Muslims in Myanmar vow not to take up violent means to achieving recognition and equality. Consequently, ISIS has little hope of making inroads as they have in neighbouring Bangladesh and numerous other countries in the region. The information and analysis on Aung San Suu Kyi, the Rakhine Commission, and the 21st Century Panglong have been provided to illustrate the current political focus in the country. They also signify which way the country is heading. In our analysis, the government's efforts can be identified, but their continuity is questionable. In terms of acquiring greater overall stability in Myanmar, it will be necessary to earnestly address the Rohingya population. Until then, the discriminatory attitude and overbearing threat from the Buddhist majority will complicate the process of unarming ethnic groups and ending the civil war.