

# Myanmar's Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA): An Analysis of a New Muslim Militant Group and its Strategic Communications

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## Abstract

*The Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA) has been central to two major Myanmar military operations against Rohingya communities that have led to large-scale cross-border forced migrations to Bangladesh. This article describes the context for ARSA's emergence, examining the Rohingya's history in Myanmar, the nature of political violence in the country, and the history of Muslim militancy in Myanmar's Rakhine state. ARSA's emergence as a militant Muslim group is outlined and elements of ARSA's strategic communications, including its Twitter presence, are analysed, allowing the author to draw some conclusions about the nature of ARSA and its priorities.*

**Keywords:** Myanmar, Bangladesh, Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army, Rohingya, Southeast Asia, Twitter

## Introduction

During late August 2017, the situation in Myanmar's [1] northern Rakhine state was chaotic. The country's military, known as the *Tatmadaw*, was undertaking a "clearance operation" claimed to root out members of a recently emerged Muslim militant group, the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA).[2] Frustrated that ARSA had initiated attacks on police posts and an army base, the *Tatmadaw's* approach involved indiscriminately brutalising civilian members of the local Rohingya Muslim population, prompting the largest forced migration in the region since the Second World War.[3] Within weeks, around 700,000 Rohingya fled Myanmar for Bangladesh.[4] United Nations (UN) investigators subsequently described the *Tatmadaw's* actions as characterised by war crimes, crimes against humanity, and genocidal intent.[5]

While these events brought ARSA to international attention, this was not the first time ARSA's actions had prompted aggressive *Tatmadaw* retaliation. ARSA's first significant action, in October 2016, involved simultaneous attacks on three security posts, looting of weapons and ammunition and the killing of nine police, leading to a *Tatmadaw* crackdown on Rohingya communities that was described by Amnesty International as involving the "collective punishment" of Rohingya civilians and "widespread and systematic human rights violations against the group including by deliberately targeting the civilian populations with little, or no, regard for their connection to militants." [6] This operation forced around 90,000 Rohingya to flee Myanmar for Bangladesh.[7] Myanmar's authorities labelled ARSA an "extremist terrorist" group [8] and some officials quickly, and with seemingly little evidence, portrayed the group as being connected with a long dormant (and potentially defunct) Muslim militant outfit named the Rohingya Solidarity Organisation. [9] Myanmar's authorities subsequently described ARSA as being connected with Al Qaeda, and ISIS.[10] ARSA has since been routinely identified as a terrorist group by other influential regional actors, including the governments of Bangladesh, China, and India.[11]

Despite the centrality of the ARSA group to two major *Tatmadaw* operations against Rohingya communities and two large-scale cross-border forced migrations, the ARSA organisation remains little addressed by policy makers or scholars. This article aims to address this knowledge gap, describing the context for ARSA's emergence by briefly examining the Rohingya's history and situation in Myanmar (including the long history of rights abuses by Myanmar's authorities), the nature of political violence in Myanmar, and the history of Muslim militancy in Myanmar's Rakhine state area. ARSA's emergence as a Muslim militant group is briefly outlined and elements of ARSA's strategic communications, including its Twitter presence, are considered and analysed, allowing for some conclusions about the nature of ARSA and its priorities to be drawn.

This article will draw on the framework for analysis of terrorist messaging developed by Bockstette [12] as a useful tool for analysis of ARSA's public communications. A detailed discussion about whether ARSA ought to be considered to be a terrorist group (as Myanmar's government labels it) or as a legitimate response to oppression (as ARSA portrays itself) or differently identified as an ethnic armed group (EAG) with a legitimate claim to represent the oppressed Rohingya community - and so to be included in Myanmar's nationwide peace processes alongside other Myanmar EAGs - is beyond this article's scope. The question of whether ARSA represents a legitimate response to the Rohingya's well-documented and long-term victimhood is certainly a worthy subject for scholarship. However such a discussion would risk distracting from the article's main aim of examining ARSA's strategic communications to enable some conclusions to be drawn about ARSA's nature and priorities. It is important to acknowledge that political violence is a mainstream tactic in Myanmar and has been since independence in 1948. The country is home to the world's longest running civil war, a conflict that has raged domestically since the early years of independence and once involved multiple communist insurgencies but now is largely a dispute between ethnic minorities and the national government and *Tatmadaw*. [13] In the Myanmar context, EAGs are often labelled terrorist by the government and *Tatmadaw* when they are in conflict, but might reluctantly be regarded as legitimate representatives of ethnic minority interests at times of détente with the central authorities.

### ***The Rohingya's History and Circumstances in Myanmar***

The Rohingya, a Muslim minority within the overwhelmingly Buddhist Myanmar, claim an indigenous connection to the Rakhine state area which borders Bangladesh. [14] Myanmar's government and its military do not acknowledge the legitimacy of the Rohingya identity. Because ethnicity and indigeneity are central to the country's 1982 Citizenship Law, the Rohingya have routinely been prevented from accessing citizenship rights. [15] The Rohingya have also been subjected to other serious rights restrictions, including severe limits on their freedom of movement, their access to healthcare and education, livelihood opportunities, and their ability to marry and have children. Decades of mistreatment of the Rohingya by Myanmar's authorities have been highlighted by human rights groups [16] and by scholars. [17] Amnesty International has described the Rohingya as victims of apartheid within Myanmar, [18] while researchers at the International State Crime Initiative consider the official mistreatment of the Rohingya meeting the threshold level where it can be considered genocide. [19] The Rohingya's 2017 forced deportation is subject of an ongoing International Criminal Court investigation. [20] The African state of Gambia has brought a case before the International Court of Justice accusing Myanmar of breaching its obligations under the Genocide Convention by committing genocide against the Rohingya. [21]

The 2016 and 2017 forced migrations were not the first instances of Myanmar's military precipitating large-scale expulsions of Rohingya to Bangladesh. Military operations claimed to be about addressing illegal immigration and to root out insurgents during 1978 (Operation *Nagamin*) [22] and 1991/92 (Operation *Pyi Thaya*) [23] caused hundreds of thousands of Rohingya to flee across the border into Bangladesh on each occasion. Ethnic and religious tensions between Rakhine's Buddhist population (mostly members of an ethnic group known as the Rakhine) and Rohingya Muslim communities remained mostly in check during the period of military rule. However, this changed when a well-documented rise of Buddhist nationalism accompanied Myanmar's transition towards quasi-civilian administration following the 2010 general election. [24] Despite clear evidence of rising ethnic and religious tensions in Rakhine state, the authorities made few preparations to pre-empt violence during 2012. The violence left almost 200 persons dead and displaced around 140,000 people, mostly from the Rohingya community. [25] The authorities' eventual response was to separate Buddhist and Muslim populations, a strategy that included confining Rohingya to displacement camps that have been described as concentration camps. [26] By 2021, these camps within Myanmar have become the permanent home to around 120,000 Rohingya who were originally displaced in 2012 and who now are prevented from leaving by armed guards. [27] Severely limited livelihood opportunities within Myanmar have also contributed to Rohingya leaving Myanmar by sea, becoming irregular maritime migrants. [28]

The perception that Rohingya Muslims are the victims of decades of rights abuses in Myanmar, of mass vio-

lence in 2012, and of incarceration in concentration camps contributed to calls by some Rohingya for their community to embrace political violence as a strategy to defend their people[29] These factors are explained in ARSA communications as key contributors to the formation of the ARSA group around this time.[30] Despite this, mainstream Rohingya leaders overwhelmingly adhered to their long-term strategy of rejecting political violence and instead focussed their advocacy efforts on international actors like the United Nations, and Western governments whom they hoped would prioritise human rights concerns and pressure Myanmar's authorities to recognise Rohingya rights.[31]

### ***Political Violence in Myanmar***

Violence is a mainstream tactic of political actors in Myanmar, and has been so since the early days of the country's independence in 1948.[32] Since then there has been near constant conflict between the central authorities (national government and military) and various ethnic minority groups. Conflict between the government and armed groups representing ethnic minorities, communists, *Mujahid* fighters, and at times even the remnants of the Republican Chinese *Kuomintang* contributed to the decision of the military to launch the 1962 *coup d'état* which precipitated five decades of military rule but did not end the country's internal armed conflicts.[33]

Insurgents in the Rakhine area during the immediate post-independence period included communists, ethnic Rakhine (mostly Buddhists), and Muslim *Mujahids*. While these groups' motivations and political claims varied greatly, a common claim among ethnic minority groups has been for the devolution of political power from the centre, along the lines of the federation. Many believe that this was central to the 1947 *Panglong Agreement* negotiated between ethnic minority leaders and the central authorities' leadership headed by independence hero Aung San prior to independence.[34] While Myanmar's government and *Tatmadaw* often resist minority claims for increased political influence, inclusion in the ongoing nationwide peace process does bestow a degree of political legitimacy on armed groups. However, it is important to note these groups have rarely made claims of separatism or independence. An exception were some short-lived *Mujahid* militants; they were briefly seeking incorporation of Muslim majority areas adjacent to Pakistan (East Bengal) into that Muslim-majority country during the earliest years of independence.[35]

When Myanmar's military handed control to a notionally civilian administration during 2011, political violence was not unusual in Myanmar where dozens of armed groups were active, and in some cases, controlled territory.[36] While communist insurgencies have ended [37]and *Kuomintang* groups mostly either evacuated, fled, or reformed into locally based militias [38], most armed groups in contemporary Myanmar represent ethnic minorities comprised of Buddhists or Christians.[39] In recent years, most civil war conflict in Myanmar has involved the *Tatmadaw* and EAGs from groups in Kachin and Shan states. However, by 2019 an ethnic Rakhine Buddhist armed group called the Arakan Army (AA) has been active in Rakhine state and in adjacent parts of Chin state.[40] Until 2012, Muslim groups, including the Rohingya, have not in recent decades embraced political violence as a tactic to advance their rights claims. They have not been party to any of the negotiations associated with Myanmar's nationwide peace process.[41]

### ***History of Muslim Militancy in Myanmar***

Myanmar's Rohingya have endured serious human rights abuses for decades, including a number of military operations targeting civilians and leading to large-scale forced deportations. Despite this, mainstream Rohingya leaders have, for decades, adhered to a strategy based on rejecting the kind of political violence that was routine for other ethnic minority groups making political or rights claims towards the Myanmar authorities. Many among the Rohingya's modern leadership believed that violence would run contrary to their groups' interests and would likely invite an aggressive military response as well as potentially hardening nation-wide public opinion against them in the majority Buddhist country.[42] Mainstream Rohingya leaders have instead appealed for the support of international actors like the UN, Western governments, and human rights organizations, hoping this could help progress Rohingya citizenship and rights claims. This

has been the approach of mainstream Rohingya leaders since the early 1960s when Muslim *Mujahid* insurgents surrendered to Burma's central authorities and the national government established the Mayu Frontier Administration (MFA).[43] With the insurgency ended, the 1961 creation of the MFA ensured Muslim-majority communities in the northern Arakan (Rakhine) area were governed centrally from Rangoon (Yangon) rather than by a mostly ethnic Rakhine administration based in Akyab (today's state capital, Sittwe).[44] This political concession to Muslim aspirations is noteworthy because it represented an acknowledgement of the legitimacy of these Muslims' political claims. However, shortly after Burma's 1962 military coup, the military-led authorities ended the special status of the MFA.

The *Mujahid* insurgency had operated during a time, following the end of the Second World War, when political instability in the Arakan (Rakhine) area often meant that Burma's authorities effectively controlled little outside of the major population centres with outlying areas being controlled by various armed groups including *Mujahids*, two separate communist armies, and ethnic Rakhine nationalist forces.[45] *Mujahid* militancy was not homogenous and while some supported the incorporation of Muslim-majority communities into the also recently independent state of Pakistan, others aimed for increased Muslim political control within Burma amid fears that a promised Arakan (Rakhine) statehood could lead to Buddhist political dominance of the Muslim population. Creating the MFA had taken political impetus away from the *Mujahid* militants, and its scrapping became a key motivation for some Rohingya to maintain a commitment to political violence.[46] These small groups (often numbering only in the dozens) had limited capacity to undertake violent actions. Mainstream Rohingya leaders mostly adopted a non-violent approach, advocating for Rohingya human rights and citizenship. Despite this, in recent decades Myanmar's authorities have often pointed to the existence of Rohingya groups (however small) who maintained a commitment to political violence throughout the 1970s, 1980s, and beyond as an indication of unbroken Rohingya *Mujahid* militancy starting in the early years of independence.

Militant groups associated with the Rohingya post-1962 political situation included the Rohingya Independence Force (which objected to the military coup of 1962 and the subsequent banning of Rohingya civil society organisations), the Rohingya Solidarity Organisation (RSO) and the Arakan Rohingya Islamic Front (ARIF).[47] The RSO may have been a precursor to the ARIF or the two groups may have allied during the mid-1990s to form the Rohingya Solidarity Alliance (RSA), a group which at its peak might have had up to 500 men under arms, but one that was "extremely limited and factionalised."[48] The RSO label came to be used as a brand by small militant groups regardless of their connection with the original group.[49] Alliances were usually short-lived, groups were based in Bangladesh, and their capacity for military action was extremely limited, often involving only small arms fire or the use of grenades – certainly not the markers of a popularly supported and well-resourced insurgency.[50] While one Rohingya group, the Rohingya Patriotic Front, has been described by scholars as inspired by the worldwide pan-Islamic movements of the 1970s, and as one which did advocate Muslim separatism, scholars have not linked Rohingya militancy of the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s with trans-national jihadi groups.[51] These militant groups were never large and were effectively defunct by the 1990s, with a number of prominent leaders declaring their support for non-violence. In recent times, Myanmar's government and the *Tatmadaw* have exaggerated and deliberately misrepresented Muslim militancy. For instance, in 2014 the government surprisingly announced a search for RSO connected "Rohingya terrorists" in Mon and Pegu states far from Rakhine state and with apparently little evidence [52], and in 2016 ARSA's attacks were similarly labelled as the work of the RSO, despite a clear lack of evidence for RSO involvement.[53]

Rohingya militancy was functionally defunct by the 2000s, with mainstream Rohingya leaders advocating a non-violent approach to politics that involved appeals to international actors including human rights organisations, foreign governments, and the UN. However, persistent rights violations against the Rohingya community, sometimes described as genocide, undermined the credibility of this approach. During the decades of military-rule these crimes were often invisible to outside observers due to strict media censorship and bans on media and academic visits to Rohingya communities in Myanmar.[54] However, as Myanmar began a transition towards a quasi-civilian administration from 2011 onwards, there were changes to media rules

which meant the plight of Rohingya victims of rights abuses and in particular the mass internal displacement during 2012 and the confinement of Rohingya to concentration camps received far more international media attention than had been the case during the decades before.[55] International media exposure made the Rohingya a *cause célèbre* within the Muslim *Ummah* and a focus for charitable donations. The visibility of rights abuses against Rohingya motivated some among the Rohingya diaspora to consider a more militant strategy and to establish the ARSA group.[56]

### **ARSA: Formation, Leadership, Growth, and Action**

Known first by the Arabic name *Harakah al-Yaqin* (meaning Faith Movement), and later as the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army, the newest Rohingya militant group is most commonly identified by the ARSA acronym (and often as Arsa).[57] ARSA claims as its leader Ataullah abu Ammar Jununi, known commonly as Ata Ullah, understood to be a Pakistan born Rohingya who lived for much of his life in Saudi Arabia. He was politicized by media reports of ongoing human rights violations against the Rohingya community and the large-scale incarceration of Rohingya in concentration camps following the 2012 violence.[58] Little is known about ARSA's early funders but the International Crisis Group believes financing comes from a committee of supporters in Mecca and Medina although their identity remains unclear. This has led some to question whether some ARSA actions might actually represent 'false flag' attacks by Myanmar's security forces with the objective of misdirecting blame for the attacks in order to discredit the Rohingya community and justify a disproportionately violent military response in the form of 'clearance operations'.[59]

That ARSA undertook military engagements in 2016 and 2017, and that these prompted immediate *Tatmadaw* responses resulting in large-scale forced deportations of Rohingya to Bangladesh, has been widely reported in international media, by UN investigators, and also noted by scholars.[60] However, their reports have tended to focus on the humanitarian and military consequences of ARSA's actions rather than the nature of the group. One of the first detailed international studies of ARSA was the International Crisis Group's report *Myanmar: A New Muslim Insurgency in Rakhine State?*[61] While the title characterised ARSA similarly to jihadi secessionist groups like the Moro Islamic Liberation Front of the southern Philippines, the report's contents included a sobering warning that, "A heavy-handed security response that fails to respect fundamental principles of proportionality and distinction is not only in violation of international norms; it is also deeply counterproductive." [62] Similar arguments about the counter-productive nature of aggressive security responses have been made by scholars who have engaged with questions about ARSA's ideological perspective and origins.[63] This point is made strongly by Bashar who suggested that, "For long-lasting peace, Myanmar should take a comprehensive approach that incorporates inclusion, social cohesion and communal harmony, instead of a counter-insurgency focus only." [64]

ARSA has frequently portrayed itself publicly as defenders of Rohingya civilians against mistreatment by Myanmar's military, asserting it maintains no ties to trans-national jihadi groups. This perspective was often accepted by scholars as an accurate assessment of ARSA's situation during the 2017 – 2018 period.[65] However, by 2019 Bashar was comfortable suggesting stronger links might well exist between ARSA and trans-national jihadi groups.[66] In a country where political violence has been a mainstream tactic of ethnic minorities since the 1940s, ARSA commonly presented its actions in an ethno-nationalist context consistent with the approach of many other Myanmar non-state armed groups.[67] However, a noteworthy difference was that by 2015, while other ethnic minorities that might have maintained armed wings were still able to participate in Myanmar's democratic process, the Rohingya were not.

The Rohingya's last collective link with Myanmar's political mainstream was severed when the quasi-civilian government, under pressure from Buddhist nationalists, disenfranchised virtually all Rohingya a few months before the country's 2015 general election.[68] With the stroke of a pen, the Rohingya were made unique among the country's other ethnic minorities that maintained an armed wing, because they were denied any simultaneous participation in the country's democratic processes. Disenfranchising the Rohingya undermined the credibility of mainstream Rohingya leaders who had long pressed for the group to stick to

peaceful political strategies, and consequently strengthened ARSA's hand.

Advocates of peaceful political engagement were further undermined by the Myanmar authorities' reluctance to provide meaningful protection for moderate Rohingya village leaders during 2016 and 2017 when ARSA's presence in northern Rakhine state was certainly known to them. The murders of dozens of moderate Rohingya village leaders and those who spoke against ARSA went largely unaddressed by the authorities. [69] While some killings may have been attributable to local crime gangs using ARSA as a convenient cover to settle old scores, government authorities refused to intervene when Rohingya sought their help. This stands in contrast to the burdensome official regulation of virtually all other aspects of Rohingya life. When Rohingya asked for help, their claims about local militant recruitment and violence were treated as internal Rohingya community concerns. Myanmar's authorities could hardly have provided ARSA with any greater recruitment assistance as the group organised in northern Rakhine state. Official inaction certainly cost the lives of moderate Rohingya village leaders and contributed to a spiral of silence which ultimately strengthened ARSA's ability to recruit and organise ahead of its 2016 and 2017 attacks.

ARSA emerged as a military presence during October 2016 when the previously unknown group killed nine security personnel in northern Rakhine state, sparking fears among Myanmar officialdom of a possible return to the Mujahid militancy of the 1950s, or the emergence of an ISIS-style insurgency seeking exclusive Muslim control of territory.[70] ARSA's 2016 attacks precipitated a brutal crackdown from Myanmar's military that forcibly deported around 90,000 Rohingya to Bangladesh.[71] The *Tatmadaw's* aggressive and speedy response ought to have alerted ARSA that their future actions would bring a similar if not more aggressive response, particularly as ARSA's subsequent 2017 attacks occurred in the context of a major *Tatmadaw* troop build-up in northern Rakhine state.[72]

In August 2017, the Myanmar government was scheduled to receive the recommendations of Kofi Annan's Advisory Commission on Rakhine State, which were widely expected to include a call for improvements to Rohingya rights.[73] There were fears among the Rohingya that the military would pre-empt the announcement by attacking Rohingya communities, regardless of the actions of ARSA. Many participants in ARSA's 2017 attacks on government security posts acted with the belief they were pre-empting an inevitable *Tatmadaw* onslaught. Some Rohingya the author of this article interviewed in Bangladesh refugee camps about the 2017 attacks claimed that ARSA encouraged them to attack government security installations (often armed with little more than farming tools) on the understanding that once the attack was underway, trained ARSA soldiers would join the fight, but ARSA's soldiers did not appear.[74] This situation understandably resulted in a great deal of anger among Rohingya and contributed to a perception that ARSA's decisions had precipitated the *Tatmadaw* crackdown that led to the massive scale of their forced deportation to Bangladesh and the associated human rights abuses.

The strong *Tatmadaw* crackdowns that followed ARSA's armed actions during 2016 and 2017 and the devastating consequences for Rohingya civilians (including large-scale forced deportations), certainly served the political interests of the *Tatmadaw* who long wished to deport Rohingya from Myanmar. In the aftermath of the 2017 forced deportation, *Tatmadaw* leader Senior General Min Aung Hlaing left little doubt about the *Tatmadaw's* intentions by describing the Rohingya's continued presence in Myanmar as "unfinished business" from the Second World War.[75] Whether the 2017 violence was initiated by ARSA or instigated by the *Tatmadaw* who used ARSA's attacks as a pretext for a planned crackdown on Rohingya civilian communities, the outcome for ordinary Rohingya was tragic. It was described by United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres as a "human rights nightmare". It was also a vindication of the mainstream Rohingya leadership's long-term political strategy of non-violence.[76] The implementation of the Annan Commission's recommendations – which included a call to re-examine the link between ethnicity and citizenship, a major impediment to Rohingya rights – would certainly have been a positive step for the Rohingya community.[77] The *Tatmadaw's* 2017 "clearance operation" and its consequences significantly altered the political landscape, shifting the attention away from the Annan Commission's recommendations and towards the Rohingya's humanitarian situation as refugees in Bangladesh and focusing on the security situation in northern Rakhine state. While the rights abuses associated with the *Tatmadaw's* response to ARSA's 2017 attacks cannot

be excused and are legitimately the subject of an International Criminal Court investigation [78], renewed Rohingya militancy, as envisaged by ARSA, did not provide any protection for Rohingya communities and likely encouraged a more brutal *Tatmadaw* crackdown than might otherwise have been the case.

### ***ARSA's Strategic Communications***

The liberalisation of media rules from 2012 onwards allowed militant groups operating in Myanmar to utilise, for the first time, communication tools already commonly used in other parts of the world.[79] ARSA used mobile phone text messages, and soon the encrypted WhatsApp, for its internal communications and recruitment while using Facebook and Twitter to communicate its message more widely. ARSA's Facebook presence effectively ended when the group was designated a "dangerous organisation" by Facebook in 2017. [80] ARSA continued to regularly post to its Twitter account (@ARSA\_Official) which has not been removed from that platform.[81] The removal of ARSA's Facebook presence while it continued to Tweet is likely attributable to differences in the local usage of each platform. Facebook is overwhelmingly Myanmar's most popular domestic internet site and accounts for more than 90% of social media traffic [82] while Twitter mostly serves a small local English-speaking audience and the international community (although notably, the domestic popularity of Twitter increased in the aftermath of Myanmar's 2021 military coup). Myanmar's government and military would likely have been concerned that ARSA's Facebook presence risked providing the group with domestic legitimacy which might not have been the case with its Twitter presence. ARSA's Tweets are also in English, another indication they are aimed at a mostly foreign audience of diplomats, media, and human rights activists.

Many of ARSA's external communications can still be readily accessed either in their original locations, or in the form of reposts. Aside from ARSA's Twitter feed, the group has also made use of YouTube to post videos, usually statements by the group's leader Ata Ullah.[83] These statements are made in Arabic and in the Rohingya's own language, and frequently include English language subtitles. In these video clips Ata Ullah is usually flanked by ARSA recruits carrying guns. Ata Ullah has also given a small number of media interviews, including one to the Reuters news agency in March 2017.[84]

An examination of ARSA's (@ARSA\_Official) Tweets during a two year period from when the group first Tweeted in April 2017 – the time ARSA was most active in Myanmar – provides useful insights into the messages ARSA wishes to communicate to the outside world. The quantity of these Tweets provide a suitable dataset for analysis, using Bockstette's analytical framework.[85] During that time (April 2017 to April 2019) ARSA Tweeted 134 times and by April 2019 had attracted 16,400 followers (this has risen to 20,300 by December 2021). In 2019, @ARSA\_Official followed just 27 profiles, mostly related to government and politics (including President Trump, Prime Minister Modi, US Department of State), human rights groups (including Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch), some leaders of mainstream Rohingya groups, and journalists. The profile also included the ARSA logo – a map outline of Rakhine state and two crossed assault rifles above the group's English language name.

ARSA's Tweets were for the purpose of this article categorised by drawing on the framework for analysis of jihadi communication strategies developed by Carsten Bockstette in the context of Al-Qaeda's ongoing communications war and published in 2008.[86] Bockstette's framework highlights the way jihadis aimed to use communication strategies to compensate for the asymmetry in their military might. Bockstette explained that "Jihadi terrorists placed a great deal of emphasis on developing comprehensive communication strategies in order to reach their desired short-, mid- and long-term goals and desired end states." [87] Bockstette divided these communication goals into three categories: "legitimizing" (recruitment, fundraising and ideological outreach), "propagating" (justifying the violence and situating this within an Islamic context) and "intimidating" (the coercion and intimidation of the group's opponents).[88] These were the three labels applied to each of ARSA's 2017 to 2019 Tweets. While there might be some overlap between the subjects of the Tweets examined – a Tweet classified as primarily seeking to legitimise ARSA might also include elements of propaganda - classifications were determined by each Tweet's principal objective or focus.

The overwhelming majority of ARSA's Tweets (106 from the 134 total) can be described as seeking to legitimize the group and its activities, for instance, correcting media reports that portrayed the group as unnecessarily violent, or having targeted civilians.[89] A small subset of ARSA's Tweets (nineteen) can be described as propaganda, seeking to justify the group's activities or place these in a broader Islamic context and often presenting ARSA as giving Rohingya a necessary political voice which was lacking before. Only nine Tweets fall into the "intimidating" category, although it can plausibly be argued that ARSA's presence in Myanmar as an armed group and its use of a logo which includes assault rifles diminishes its need for further intimidating signals.

A similar desire to build the group's legitimacy can also be found in other ARSA communications, notably in its 2019 report *Reviving the Courageous Hearts*, a 69 page document outlining the group's history, motivations and objectives.[90] This report devotes considerable space to subjects that justify the group's formation and use of violence – "Precursor to Rohingya Genocide" (Chapter 2), "Final Stages of Genocide" (Chapter 4), and "Rohingya Resistances in Response to 2012 Violence" (Chapter 5) - and a chapter "Brief History: Rohingya Armed Resistances Against Burmese Tyrants" (Chapter 3) which links ARSA with previous Rohingya militant groups including the Mujahids, ARIF and RSO.[91] As with ARSA's approach to Twitter, projecting an intimidating posture was a secondary concern and mostly achieved through the use of full page colour photographs of armed ARSA soldiers to indicate the group's capacity for action rather than through written text.

Using Tweets, other communications like *Reviving the Courageous Hearts* and public statements by its leader Ata Ullah published on YouTube, ARSA consistently presented itself as an ethno-nationalist group with a localised focus and without links with transnational jihadi groups. Indeed, ARSA in July 2019 even Tweeted this specific claim: "It is, once again, reassured that #ARSA only legitimately and objectively operates as an #ETHNO NATIONALIST movement within its ancestral homeland (Arakan) in #Burma & its activities had not & will not transcend beyond its country." [92]

Ata Ullah's public statements, available on YouTube, have usually followed the same approach by presenting ARSA's violence as a necessary and justified response to the Rohingya's decades of mistreatment by Myanmar's government and military. However, one interview he provided to Reuters news agency in March 2017 significantly deviated from that script. Reuters reported on 31 March 2017 that, "The leader of a Rohingya Muslim insurgency against Myanmar's security forces said on Friday his group would keep fighting "even if a million die" unless the country's leader, Aung San Suu Kyi, took action to protect the religious minority." [93] ARSA subsequently furiously denied the veracity of the Reuters interview, with a series of identical Tweets on April 5 directed at journalists and prominent human rights activists: "#ARSA Commander, Ata Ullah, denies quoting a figure '1 M or 1.5 M #Rohingya people' in his recent interview with @Reuters" [94] The speed and ferocity of ARSA's denial was strongly indicative of how the group prioritised building its legitimacy in the eyes of key international actors, including international media, human rights figures, and foreign governments. This provides a strong indication that ARSA regards building legitimacy as a key role of its strategic communications with intimidation and situating the group's work within an Islamic framework as secondary considerations.

The absence of ARSA communications that aim to intimidate (and the group's denial of Ata Ullah's statement to Reuters that did precisely that) strongly indicate ARSA regards the key role of its strategic communications through public avenues is to legitimize the existence of the group and its activities. However, while an analysis of ARSA's publicly available strategic communications might conclude ARSA has not heavily relied on intimidation as a communications tool, and neither does it use its strategic communications to situate its activities within an Islamic framework, this does not tell the whole story. Language, access to communications technology, and long-term restrictions on the ability of Rohingya to travel outside their home communities also play a role.

ARSA operates in an environment (Myanmar's northern Rakhine state and now Bangladesh refugee camps adjacent to the Myanmar frontier) where Rohingya mostly speak their own Rohingya language (which has

similarities with the Chittagonian dialect of Bengali) that is little known by foreigners. Decades of education restrictions also mean there are fewer English speakers in Rohingya communities than in other parts of Myanmar and the group's collective poverty means access to even cheap computer technology and internet services have been restricted. In this context, ARSA's local recruitment within Myanmar had been known to involve ARSA organisers including Ata Ullah making personal visits to individual Rohingya communities, asking the community to provide five to ten men for basic training.[95] Once basic training was completed, ARSA's new recruits returned to their home communities where they encouraged active religious observance, and undertook security duties including allegedly violently silencing Rohingya who opposed the group's activities or were regarded as too close to the authorities. ARSA's communication with recruits often takes place through voice messages using WhatsApp, with the encryption regarded as providing a degree of security.[96] It was through WhatsApp messages that ARSA made its calls to action in 2016 and 2017.

This indicates that ARSA, almost from its inception, has run a dual-track communications strategy. Publicly available communications aimed at legitimising the group in the eyes of outsiders, while private messages and face to face training were used to encourage Islamic religious observance and to project the group's capacity to undertake violence. ARSA clearly believed that legitimisation of its actions in the eyes of outsiders served a valuable role, but ARSA's external messaging does not provide a complete picture of the nature of the group – only what ARSA desired to project to key outside audiences. ARSA's actions often do not appear to be consistent with their external messaging. ARSA's communication with the Rohingya themselves was markedly different, more personalised and for outsiders (including scholars) significantly more difficult to reliably access. The outcomes of ARSA's internal communication, if not the messages themselves, can be observed through ARSA's actions.

ARSA has frequently claimed that they are not connected with transnational jihadi groups and the adoption of the ARSA name would seem to attest to this. However, ARSA's original name *Harakah al-Yaqin* (Faith Movement) clearly indicated religious roots, as has the group's encouragement of religious observance and instances of mistreatment of non-Muslims among the Rohingya community or living in close proximity to Rohingya communities. Amnesty International published a 2018 report suggesting ARSA was responsible for two 2017 massacres in which up to 99 Hindus resident in northern Rakhine state were murdered, including children.[97] These killings do indicate a religious intolerance similar to that of groups like ISIS, although ARSA denied responsibility. However throughout 2019 and 2020 there were also reports of ARSA targeting the small Christian Rohingya community living in the Bangladesh refugee camps, as well as Rohingya civilians assisting international aid groups.[98] ARSA have also been criticised for their role in killing moderate Rohingya community leaders in Rakhine state during the 2016-2017 period, a practice that has allegedly continued in the Bangladesh camps.[99] During September 2021, the high profile murder of Mohib Ullah, a moderate Rohingya leader who was gunned down outside the refugee camp office of the organisation he headed, the Arakan Rohingya Society for Peace and Human Rights, was widely blamed on ARSA, although the group denied responsibility for the murder.[100] This prompted a strong response from Rohingya civil society groups, 21 of which issued a joint statement, declaring: "We, the undersigned Rohingya organizations, denounce the so-called "Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army – ARSA" (or Harakah Al Yakeen), a criminal group that self-proclaims to be fighting for the rights of the Rohingya people. The Rohingya community does not accept ARSA as a group that represents the ideals and interests of the Rohingya community in or outside of Burma. Thus, the group must not claim it represents the interests of the Rohingya nation." [101]

There are reports too that ARSA has pressured Rohingya refugees to pay "taxes" to the group [102] and urged camp residents to be more religiously observant which indicates these tendencies may have been present in the group from the beginning but were actively hidden.

### **Concluding Comments**

By examining a few key elements of ARSA's strategic communications, including the group's Tweets, YouTube statements by its leader, and the *Reviving the Courageous Hearts* report, ARSA has been shown to

operate a dual-track communications strategy that prioritises seeking legitimacy from international actors but uses other elements of the framework for jihadi communications suggested by Bockstette (propaganda and intimidation) when engaging with Rohingya communities. Despite presenting itself to outsiders (using platforms like Twitter) within an ethno-nationalist framework much like mainstream Myanmar EAGs and without links to trans-national jihadi groups, this analysis strongly suggests ARSA presents itself using a much more religious framework within Rohingya communities. ARSA likely places a much greater value on the centrality of Islam and its observance by the Rohingya than the group might be comfortable to admit to outsiders.

ARSA's presence in the Rohingya's Bangladesh refugee camps means transnational jihadi groups and ARSA's leadership and members have much easier access to each other than would have been the case when most Rohingya lived in Myanmar prior to the forced deportation of 2017. If ARSA's leadership and transnational jihadi groups aspired to closer links, the likelihood that they would be able to achieve this aim is high. During the period for which ARSA's communications were examined for this article (2017-2019), there was little publicly available evidence of strong ARSA links with transnational jihadi groups. However, while finding no evidence of ARSA links with transnational jihadi organisations, the analysis in this article strongly indicates ARSA ought to be understood as an ethno-religious group rather than ethno-nationalist as it has claimed. This suggests ARSA may be more willing to engage with transnational jihadi groups than it has previously admitted.

Further complicating the security landscape for the Rohingya refugee community in Bangladesh is the virtually unregulated export of illicit drugs, principally amphetamines, from Myanmar since the time of the military coup of February 2021.[103] While poverty ensures that Rohingya refugees are far from a lucrative market for illicit drugs, the proximity of refugee camps to a porous international frontier means the Rohingya have found themselves living on a key transit corridor for contraband. There are credible reports that elements of the ARSA group have become involved with the drug trade as a means of revenue raising.[104] This means ARSA's demands for loyalty may now come with the expectation of support for ARSA's illicit drug trade activities as well as support for ARSA's approach to political violence and religious observance.

The Rohingya have collectively demonstrated themselves to be resistant to radical Islamic perspectives, and the mainstream Rohingya leadership continues to embrace peaceful political approaches. However, with more than one million Rohingya refugees confined, long-term, in Bangladesh camps and consequently more easily accessed by ARSA and by radical Islamic groups [105], there is a risk that this could change, particularly as these camps are increasingly securitised by Bangladesh's government with the erection of barbed wire fences [106], enforcement of strict curfews [107], internet shut downs [108], and with severely curtailed livelihood opportunities for camp residents.[109] Bangladesh's authorities may find a securitised approach towards the Rohingya refugee community has the unintended consequence of pushing an unwilling Rohingya population towards an ARSA with closer ties to transnational jihadis and narco-traffickers than the group's public face communications have previously indicated.

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## Notes

- [1] Myanmar is still often known as Burma. To avoid confusion, the name “Myanmar” is used to refer to the country since its name was officially changed by the military junta in 1989. When referring to the country’s history prior to 1989, the name “Burma” is used.
- [2] During British-rule and Burma’s early years of independence, Rakhine state was named Arakan division, a name derived from the area’s pre-colonial identity as the Arakan kingdom. In recent years, groups like ARSA use the Arakan name as a means of communicating their claim to local legitimacy by denoting their long-term connection with the land. It is also an implicit rejection of military-junta era naming practices and associated assertions about ethnicity and indigeneity.
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