

Q & A ON THE ROHINGYA CRISIS & BUDDHIST EXTREMISM IN MYANMAR

The Rohingya are permeating public awareness. Yet, many do not know much about them—who they are or how they came to be a victimized people now at the center of global attention.

Called “the world’s most persecuted minority” by the United Nations,¹ the Rohingya are a predominantly Muslim, ethnic minority living in the Southeast Asian, Buddhist country of Myanmar (formerly Burma). For decades, they have faced discrimination and violence; in February 2017, the U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights described the abuses against the Rohingya as “very likely” amounting to crimes against humanity.² Months later, in September, he deemed the situation a “textbook example of ethnic cleansing,” while many others now believe the crisis is on the “brink of genocide.”^{3 4}

Rohingya and international NGO and U.N. reports describe widespread atrocities being committed by Myanmar soldiers, state security forces, and vigilantes acting in concert with Buddhist government actors:⁵

- Summary executions and massacres.⁶
- Separation of families, with children later murdered.⁷
- Systematic raping of Rohingya women and girls.⁸
- Attacks on Rohingya villages with small arms, mortars, and armed helicopters.⁹
- Arson and looting of almost 300 Rohingya villages (tens of thousands of homes).¹⁰
- Mass forced deportation.¹¹
- The deliberate planting of antipersonnel mines (internationally banned) on several key crossing points on the Myanmar-Bangladesh border.¹²

The recent escalation of violence and the flight of the Rohingya from Myanmar, together with the inaction by Myanmar’s State Counselor and Nobel Laureate Aung San Suu Kyi, has thrust the Rohingya’s plight into the international spotlight.¹³

I. THE ROHINGYA—AN OVERVIEW OF THE CURRENT CRISIS

Who are the Rohingya?

Rohingya are mostly Muslims (a small minority are Hindu) from a Southeast Asian region, now predominantly within Myanmar’s borders; many of them can trace their roots in this land back centuries. Most are rice farmers, while some are traders, fishermen, sailors, woodsmen, and laborers.¹⁴ Before the

2017 crisis, between 1.1 and 1.3 million Rohingya lived in Myanmar and around 400,000 lived in nearby Bangladesh¹⁵ as part of the Rohingya diaspora living mostly across Southeast Asia.¹⁶

Today, most Rohingya are considered stateless. This means that Myanmar and its neighbors, where many Rohingya now reside (often as refugees), do not consider them citizens.¹⁷ Since 1982, Rohingya living in Myanmar have not been allowed to vote, and their ability to study, work, travel, marry, pray, and access health care services has been severely restricted.¹⁸ One Myanmar army commander says that the Rohingya's demand for citizenship is one of the causes of state violence against them.¹⁹

In Myanmar, the Rohingya live in the northwestern part of the Rakhine state, while those who flee often become refugees across the border in Bangladesh, where they are living in cramped refugee camps.



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In a nutshell, what sparked the current crisis? Is it Buddhists against Muslims?

At its most basic level, there has been a long-standing and escalating conflict in which the Buddhist majority government of Myanmar, supported by some Buddhist religious leaders and some nationalist groups, has violently targeted Muslims in their country including the Rohingya. When a group from the Rohingya retaliated, the government escalated the violence. This triggered a mass exodus with 100,000's of people fleeing the Myanmar and the waves of violence and destruction. More specifically ...

As a repressed minority in a Buddhist-majority nation, Rohingya have experienced violence and mistreatment for decades as Muslims. However, hatred against the Rohingya is racialized as well. Their neighbors refer to the Rohingya by the derogatory term, "Kalar," which best translates to "black skinned, undesirable alien."²² As a result, many have left Myanmar over the years. Tensions escalated on August 25, 2017, when the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA), a militant Rohingya organization formed in 2016 in response to Rohingya persecution, attacked several government outposts and killed 12 security personnel. The attack led to a further crackdown by the country's military in Myanmar's Rakhine region, where most Rohingya resided.²³

The fighting between Rohingya militants and Myanmar's military intensified the severity of the conflict. 500,000 Rohingya fled Myanmar during September 2017 alone—a number that continues to rise.²⁴ In fact, by the beginning of October 2017, about half of Myanmar's Rohingya population had fled to Bangladesh,²⁵ where children comprise more than half of the Rohingya refugee population.²⁶

What's the “human toll”?

Information about the human cost of the Rohingya crisis differs. Myanmar's government reports that about 400 people from both sides combined have died since August 2017, while the U.N. announced that, as of September 7, 2017, at least 1,000 people had died.²⁷ In contrast, Bangladesh's foreign minister cited unofficial sources that put the death toll at 3,000.²⁸

Descriptions of what is happening on the ground likewise differ. Rohingya refugees report that the Myanmar military, assisted by Rakhine Buddhists, razed their villages and killed civilians.²⁹ In contrast, Myanmar's government states that most casualties are either civilians murdered by Rohingya militants, or the militants themselves.³⁰

Because Myanmar restricts media access to Rakhine (see below) and does not allow human rights investigators into the country, it is difficult to corroborate this data.³¹

II. WHO ARE THE PLAYERS?

Who are the militant Rohingyas—the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA)?

ARSA first emerged in October 2016, under the name *Harakatul Yakeen*, or Faith Movement, when its members killed several Myanmar police officers.³² In a statement released after the attack, their leader, Ataulah Abu Aar, claimed that the attack was committed to defend the Rohingya from Myanmar's military.³³ ARSA asserts that it is independent and has no connections to foreign entities or terrorist organizations.³⁴ Recently, it issued a statement warning Al Qaeda, ISIS, Lashkar-e-Taiba, and unaffiliated foreign fighters not to become involved in the Rakhine State conflict.³⁵

The International Crisis Group's recent study of this newly emerging group concludes that the ARSA leadership are Rohingya emigres based in Saudi Arabia and that their approach and objectives bear similarity to other ethnic liberation armies that existed in Myanmar during its rule by military dictatorship.³⁶

As such, they are not viewed as comparable to transnational organizations like ISIS or Al Qaeda.

As is frequently the case in this conflict, Myanmar's government does not share this view. It describes ARSA as an extremist Islamist terrorist organization.³⁷

What is the anti-Muslim group known as “969” and what is its role in the Rohingya crisis?

One of the most prominent of Myanmar's anti-Muslim hate groups is an organization called 969, which self-identifies as a Buddhist perseverance/defender movement for Myanmar. It is committed to defending the Buddhist character of Myanmar from Islamic interference. To that end, it calls for the following:

- The outlawing of interreligious marriages.³⁸
- The boycotting of Muslim businesses in Myanmar.³⁹
- The marginalization of the Rohingya.⁴⁰

The group's name is symbolic and connects the group to their Buddhist roots. The number 969 represents the “three jewels” of Buddhism: the nine attributes of the Buddha, the six attributes of his teachings, and the nine attributes of the Buddhist community.⁴¹ The number 969 is also significant, because it contrasts the Islamic importance of 786 (see footnote for further explanation).⁴²

Ashin Wirathu is the current leader of 969. He has compared Muslims to “mad dogs,” labeled the Rohingya “the enemy,” and endorsed a massacre of schoolchildren and other Muslims as a “sign of strength.”⁴³ He often uses Myanmar's memories of British colonialism to stoke hatred against the Rohingya, arguing that their population and property will soon overshadow the rest of Myanmar's population and holdings.⁴⁴

In 2003, the military government arrested Wirathu on charges of inciting religious hatred, and sentenced him to 25 years in prison.⁴⁵ His arrest did not stem from the government's concern for the plight of Muslims in Myanmar, but rather, from the junta's (i.e., the military government's) desire for law and order. When that government collapsed, Wirathu's prison term ended; he was released after 9 years.⁴⁶ Since then, he has formed key alliances including with some members of the military who support Wirathu and 969's promotion of Buddhist nationalism.⁴⁷

The 969 movement is also linked with an anti-Muslim, Buddhist nationalist organization originally called the Ma Ba Tha, which counts both Buddhist civilians and monks among its supporters. In early 2017, the fledging democratic government banned them. In response, the group changed its name to Buddha Dhamma Philanthropy Foundation.⁴⁸ Under its new moniker, the organization has succeeded in normalizing anti-Muslim sentiment in Myanmar.⁴⁹

III. HOW DID IT ALL START? A SNAPSHOT OF HISTORY

For 15 years after Myanmar's independence from Britain in 1948, the Rohingya enjoyed equal rights and citizenship. What changed? When, and why?

From 1948 to 1962, Myanmar had a democratic government that recognized the Rohingya ethnicity. The Rohingya language was featured in government publications, radio broadcasts, and licenses.⁵⁰ The Myanmar Parliament had Rohingya representatives.⁵¹ Ultimately, the government did not hold the nation together. This prompted a coup d'état under General Ne Win in 1962.

The resulting junta had an “unwritten policy” to get rid of religious and ethnic minorities living in Myanmar.⁵² The first change for the Rohingya came in 1974, when the Ne Win government officially denied them citizenship.⁵³ Alleged army abuses followed, and by 1977, 200,000 Rohingya had fled into Bangladesh.⁵⁴ It was the first of multiple exoduses.

In 1982, Myanmar's junta passed the Burmese Citizenship Law, which determined which ethnicities would be officially recognized by the government.⁵⁵ Any member of a community who had not lived in Myanmar prior to the year 1823 was deemed ineligible for citizenship, effectively barring any community that had arrived during British rule from becoming a citizen.⁵⁶ Notwithstanding that some Rohingya trace their roots way back, others arrived later. Both their neighbors and their government deem them illegal migrants, not citizens.

The situation took another turn in the early part of the 21st century, when some Buddhist organizations began calling for the elimination of Muslims in Myanmar.⁵⁷

What happened in 2012 and 2016 and how is it relevant to the current crisis?

The current crisis is a resurgence of violence against the Rohingya seen in 2012 and 2016, rather than a new development.

By 2012-13, anti-Muslim sentiment had escalated and turned to violence, targeting all Muslims in Myanmar including the Rohingya. At the time, Buddhist monks participated in violent riots attacking Rohingya villages.⁵⁸ Elsewhere, violence against the Rohingya in Rakhine spilled over into the central Myanmar city of Meiktila, when a dispute in a Muslim-owned gold shop resulted in the razing of the city's Muslim district.⁵⁹

Violence erupted again a few years later when the newly formed militant Rohingya group ARSA attacked three police outposts on October 9th in northern Rakhine State. Myanmar's government declared the area to be an "operation zone," and began a crackdown in the region; the military subjected the Rohingya to curfews, raids, and violence.⁶⁰ Eight Rohingya women from the village of U Shey Kya in Rakhine State testified to Reuters that members of the military broke into their houses, stole their property, and raped them.⁶¹

On October 23, 2016, thousands of well-organized Rakhine men armed with machetes, swords, guns, and Molotov cocktails attacked Muslim villages across the Rakhine State; at least 70 Rohingya were killed in one town alone, while security forces did nothing to protect them.⁶² Even Muslim Kamans, a recognized ethnic group in Myanmar (unlike the Rohingya), were attacked during the riots.⁶³ After the riots, the government built camps to "protect" the Rohingya population and used intimidation to make them leave their traditional homes and villages. A Rohingya fisherman from Pauktaw testified:

The township council sold us 60 liters of fuel so we could leave. We came to Sittwe to save our lives. The situation was getting worse day by day, we reported it to the local authorities and they asked us what we wanted to do. We said to the authorities we wanted to save our lives. The authorities told us to leave. [A local leader] of the RNDP said that if we did not leave our place we would be killed and our villages would be burned. Just after we left from our place by [by sea] we could see it [our village] was already on fire, we could see the smoke and flames.⁶⁴

Myanmar's military participated directly in the burning of Rohingya villages alongside Rakhine villagers and Buddhist monks, an escalation from their behavior in 2012.⁶⁵ Human Rights Watch identified 430 razed buildings in Rohingya villages as of November 10, 2016.⁶⁶ Ultimately, Myanmar's 2016 military operation left dozens dead and 30,000 people displaced.⁶⁷

IV. BUDDHISM AND THE ROHINGYA CRISIS

People often think of Buddhism as a peaceful religion. In Myanmar, Buddhists are leading the destruction of the Rohingya community. How is that possible?

As in all religious traditions, Buddhism is internally diverse. That said, Buddhist religious leaders from across the globe have overwhelmingly denounced violence against the Rohingya and/or Ashin Wirathu and his movement:

- The Dalai Lama: Following violence against the Rohingya in 2016, the Dalai Lama urged Buddhists in Myanmar to “remember the Buddha’s face” when harboring hate toward Muslims. The Dalai Lama also attempted to persuade Aung San Suu Kyi, the current leader of Myanmar and a Nobel laureate, to stop the alleged genocide of the Rohingya.⁶⁸
- Ven. Thich Nhat Hanh: Vietnamese Nobel laureate Ven. Thich Nhat Hanh signed a statement calling on Myanmar’s Buddhist community to practice [non-violence](#) and compassion toward the Rohingya.⁶⁹
- Kosala Mahinda: The leader of one of the most prominent organizations of Buddhists in Indonesia, Avalokitesvara Temple Foundation, denounced violence against Rohingya Muslims. Stating that “Buddhism teaches us to love all people,” Kosala Mahinda argued that the Buddhist extremism in Myanmar does not reflect Buddhism’s teachings.⁷⁰
- Council of Buddhist Communities: This Buddhist organization in Indonesia called upon Buddhists in the nation to assist Rohingya refugees.⁷¹
- Malaysian Buddhist Cooperative Society: Malaysia’s premier Buddhist society stated they would stand by the Rohingya and reject their violent treatment.⁷²
- International Network of Engaged Buddhists: In 2012, the International Network of Engaged Buddhists’ (INEB) Executive and Advisory Board issued a statement condemning violence between Buddhists and Muslims in the Rakhine state. It also called for Myanmar’s government and religious leaders to intervene in the crisis.⁷³

In the Buddha’s own words:

- “Hurt not others in ways you yourself would find hurtful.” Udana-Varga, 5:18.
- “Hatreds never cease through hatred in this world, through love alone they cease. This is an eternal law.” Dhammapada 3-5.
- “One is not called noble who harms living beings. By not harming living beings one is called noble.” Dhammapada, 270.

Where can I learn more?

[Who are the Rohingya Muslims?](#) (video) BBC News

[Who is burning down Rohingya villages?](#) BBC News

[Shamshida a Rohingya student defies the odds in Malaysia](#) (video) UNHCR

[Malaysia: Escape to Hardship](#) (video) UNHCR

[The Battle for Myanmar's Buddhist spirit](#) (video) The Guardian

[The Rohingya: Silent Abuse](#) (This documentary explores the Rohingya identity and their struggles in both Myanmar and Bangladesh. Some of the content contains graphic material.) Al Jazeera

[Myanmar: Who are the Rohingya?](#) Al Jazeera

[Rohingya crisis explain in maps](#) Al Jazeera

[Myanmar](#) International Rescue Committee

[Myanmar Factsheet](#) UNHCR

[Bangladesh Factsheet](#) UNHCR

[Timeline: A Short History of Myanmar's Rohingya Minority](#) Wall Street Journal

[The Rohingya Issue: A Thorny Obstacle between Burma \(Myanmar\) and Bangladesh](#) Kei Memoto

[Separating Fact from Fiction about Myanmar's Rohingya](#) Center For Strategic & International Studies

[Myanmar: Who are the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army?](#) BBC News

[Burma: Satellite Images Show Urban Destruction](#) Human Rights Watch

[969: The Strange Numerological Basis for Burma's Religious Violence](#) The Atlantic

[Ashin Wirathi: Myanmar and its vitriolic monk](#) BBC News

['It only takes one terrorist': the Buddhist monk who reviles Myanmar's Muslims](#) The Guardian

[Extremism Rises Among Myanmar Buddhists](#) The New York Times

[Q&A: The Refugee Crisis](#) Tanenbaum

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