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Rohingya Crisis Escalates as The Arakan Army Expands Its Control

By Iftekharul Bashar

SYNOPSIS

The Arakan Army, a powerful ethnic armed organisation, now controls much of Western Myanmar, including the border with Bangladesh. This development significantly alters the region's security dynamics. It raises serious concerns about the Rohingya crisis and the evolving crime-terror nexus. There is also an increasing risk of jihadist activities along the Myanmar-Bangladesh border region and beyond.

COMMENTARY

The Arakan Army's increasing territorial control over swathes of Western Myanmar has intensified the already dire situation for the Rohingyas, a persecuted Arakanese Muslim minority concentrated in rural northern Rakhine State. The Arakan Army (AA) is a rebel group [formed in 2009](#) to secure greater autonomy for the Rakhine Buddhist population in Western Myanmar's Rakhine State.

Currently, the AA controls [15 out of 17 townships](#) in Myanmar's Rakhine State, an area roughly the size of Taiwan. In December 2024, the group captured [Maungdaw](#), a strategic town in Rakhine State, effectively taking control of the entire 271 km border between Myanmar and Bangladesh. This expansion, which includes the capture of Paletwa in Chin State bordering India, has significantly altered the region's power dynamics. As a result, the AA has effectively established itself as the de facto authority in Rakhine State.

The phenomenal rise of the AA has raised concerns about Myanmar's political and security future. The military's limited response to the AA's advances has led to questions about whether this is a strategic choice or due to operational challenges, as ongoing conflicts elsewhere divert resources. Some gains in Rakhine State were likely

hard-fought, but others met less resistance due to the military's limited presence as it faced a manpower shortage.

Reports from 2024 alleged that the military had [coerced](#) vulnerable Rohingya individuals to fight against the AA, offering legal status and financial incentives in exchange. Many stateless Rohingyas have undergone military training under threat of violence, resulting in high casualties and being used as human shields. Additionally, groups like the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA) and the Rohingya Solidarity Organisation (RSO) were accused of [kidnapping Rohingya youth from refugee camps](#) for military training.

According to observers, the Tatmadaw's [conscription of Rohingyas is illegal under Myanmar's laws](#), as the 2010 People's Military Service Law applies only to citizens, and the Rohingyas have been denied citizenship under the 1982 Citizenship Law. The Tatmadaw has historically used ethnic divisions as a strategy, and forcing Rohingyas to collaborate could worsen tensions, especially with anti-government groups.

For the Rohingyas, who have long been victims of [persecution and violence](#) by Myanmar's military, the AA's growing influence compounds their suffering. Although the United League of Arakan (ULA), the political wing of the Arakan Army, had previously pledged to accommodate the Rohingyas in a potentially autonomous or independent Rakhine State, they do not recognise the distinct identity of the Rohingyas and expect them to submit to Rakhine dominance.

As a non-state actor, AA lacks accountability. [AA's attacks](#) have increased the Rohingya's displacement. In August 2024, for instance, the AA used drones to target fleeing Rohingyas in Maungdaw, the largest Rohingya-majority area, killing several people. Additionally, the Rohingyas have accused the AA of [burning Buthidaung town](#), the second-largest Rohingya-majority area, in Rakhine State in mid-May 2024, with the United Nations noting at least four beheadings attributed to the group.

These attacks were the key factors that have pushed many Rohingyas in recent months to seek refuge across the border in Bangladesh, where there are already more than a million Rohingyas languishing in refugee camps. According to recent updates from Bangladeshi authorities, almost [65,000 Rohingya refugees entered southeastern Bangladesh](#) between November 2023 and December 2024, fleeing unrest and violence in their home state of Rakhine.

AA's control over the Myanmar-Bangladesh border region has created an existential crisis for the Rohingya community and a *raison d'être* for the Rohingya armed groups such as the RSO and ARSA. In addition, the ongoing situation has created a favourable environment in southeastern Bangladesh for jihadist groups to exploit for recruitment, fundraising, training and eventually to carry out attacks. Moreover, [the rise of radicalism](#) in Bangladesh in recent months, coupled with the political turmoil there, has [weakened](#) the country's ability to respond to terrorism and transnational crimes effectively, which is mainly through policing.

As the Rohingya crisis snowballs, the growing prevalence of human smuggling and narcotics activities also poses a complex security challenge for not only the Myanmar-Bangladesh borderland but also neighbouring countries like Thailand, Malaysia and

Indonesia. Criminal groups can easily operate across these areas because of weak law enforcement and poor government control in the Myanmar-Bangladesh border region and along its maritime borders. This has led to more illegal activities, creating instability in the region. It makes it harder for countries to fight crime, terrorism, and trafficking and puts pressure on their police and resources.

Regional Security Concerns

The growing influence of the AA in Rakhine State has raised new concerns about regional security, particularly in neighbouring Bangladesh. While jihadist groups had previously sought to [exploit](#) the Rohingya crisis, their impact on the ground has been limited. However, this situation may change with the emergence of the AA as the de facto ruler of much of Rakhine State. The dominance of the AA, perceived by many Rohingyas as a Rakhine Buddhist supremacist group aiming to expel them into Bangladesh, is intensifying grievances and creating fertile ground for radicalisation.

Extremist groups, such as Al-Qaeda In The Indian Subcontinent (AQIS) and Islamic State (IS)-linked factions, have long tried to exploit the vulnerability of the displaced Rohingya population. AQIS has been vocal about their plight, framing it as part of the global Muslim struggle, while other militant jihadist groups like "Katibah al-Mahdi fi Bilad al-Arakan" have emerged in the region. The growing instability in Myanmar and Bangladesh has allowed these groups to thrive, especially following the Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan, which has bolstered AQIS's capacity to engage locally.

The situation has also become more precarious due to Bangladesh's political instability since mid-2024, which has weakened its counterterrorism efforts. Islamist militant groups, including Harkatul Jihad al-Islami Bangladesh (HuJI-B), Jama'atul Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB), [Ansar al-Islam](#), and IS (Bengal), have exploited the crisis for recruitment and fund-raising. These groups have historically had connections to Myanmar-focused wings, and with the rise of the AA, such linkages may be reactivated, heightening security concerns.

In addition, the AA's control over the Myanmar-Bangladesh border has facilitated the illegal smuggling of weapons, drugs, and people, contributing to regional instability and the potential for cross-border militancy. This control has created a more porous border, which may allow the movement of militants and recruits across the region, posing challenges for both Myanmar and Bangladesh in securing their borders. While it remains unclear as to the extent these activities will spread, there is concern that such conditions could encourage extremist groups to strengthen their networks and expand their influence.

Finally, it is also noteworthy that pro-AA online platforms are attempting to amplify the threat of Islamist militancy and to portray all Rohingyas as terrorists, thereby justifying the denial of their rights and legitimising their persecution. Such branding risks creating more problems, further alienating the moderate majority of the Rohingyas. The AA's rising influence and the resulting security challenges are thus critical factors in the future trajectory of regional militancy, particularly with the potential for jihadist groups to exploit the situation further.

As the situation evolves, neighbouring countries such as Thailand, Malaysia, and

Indonesia could face growing security challenges, particularly if militant groups seek to exploit the region's instability. The AA's rising influence and the associated security risks could thus have broader implications for regional stability, especially if jihadist groups attempt to capitalise on the uncertainty.

India and China are closely monitoring the situation in Myanmar as the AA gains control of western regions, impacting their strategic interests. India is concerned about instability near its borders and delays to its infrastructure projects, while China focuses on protecting its investments in the China-Myanmar Economic Corridor and access to the Indian Ocean. Both countries are worried about the effects of Myanmar's shifting power dynamics on their security and investments.

What Can Be Done?

The Rohingya crisis has persisted since 1978, with Myanmar's government consistently failing to find a resolution. While the international community has been providing aid to the Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh, efforts to secure a long-term solution have been limited. Bangladesh currently hosts approximately 1.3 million Rohingya refugees, placing immense strain on the country's resources and leading to economic, environmental, and social challenges, including a growing security crisis. The country has surpassed its carrying capacity, and more Rohingyas continue to arrive almost daily. AA's phenomenal rise could lead to the rise of extremist groups in the region, further escalating the security situation.

The international community needs to step up its efforts to address the crisis. This includes encouraging dialogue between the AA, Myanmar's military, the National Unity Government, and countries in the region, such as Bangladesh, Malaysia, and Indonesia. Efforts should focus on humanitarian aid, peacebuilding, and counterterrorism to prevent further radicalisation. It is also essential to push for a political solution that includes the rights and interests of all ethnic groups in Myanmar, including the Rohingya. Stronger regional cooperation is needed to tackle cross-border militancy and trafficking, which contribute to instability.

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