

Terrorism Monitor

In-depth analysis of the War on Terror

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GERMANY: MAURITANIA: BLASPHEMY CASE RAISES ISLAMIST IRE

Alexander Sehmer

Mauritania’s efforts to curtail Islamist extremism have seen success in recent years, but protesters calling for a blogger to be put to death for allegedly insulting the Prophet Mohammed show that tensions continue to simmer.

The blogger in question, Mohamed Ould Mkhaitir, was arrested back in 2013 after he posted an article on Facebook in which he invoked the Prophet in a post critical of the country’s caste system ([Entalfa](#), December 17, 2014; [Agoravox](#), December 31, 2014). He was put on trial for blasphemy in 2014 and sentenced to death, though Mkhaitir was able to press his case through a series of appeals ([PressAfrik](#), November 8). On November 9, a court reduced his sentence to a two-year jail term, meaning he will now be allowed to go free ([News 24](#), November 9).

Mkhaitir’s trials have repeatedly drawn conservative crowds ([New Arab](#), November 16, 2016). His return to court this month prompted protests once again from

Mauritania’s Islamists in the capital of Nouakchott and in the city of Nouadhibou, where the case was first heard.

Picked up by Western rights groups, Mkhaitir’s case has received some international attention, but it has also polarized groups inside Mauritania — liberals who publicly supported the blogger have reportedly received death threats from groups claiming to be “protectors” of the Prophet’s name ([Entalfa](#), June 11, 2014).

Despite the anger of the country’s conservatives, however, Mauritania has moved away from the Islamist violence that dogged it between 2005 and 2011, when it faced repeated attacks by al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM). Since then, concerted efforts at home and a greater engagement with its neighbors and the West in the battle against Islamist terrorism in the Sahel region have made a significant impact.

The threat from violent Islamists remains. At least 55 Mauritanian jihadists are fighting with AQIM, according to sources quoted in the State Department’s Country Reports on Terrorism 2016. Mauritanian authorities have also in the past rounded up suspected Islamic State supporters inside the country ([AllAfrica](#), October 15, 2014).

Last month, Nusrat al-Islam wal Muslimeen, the al-Qaeda alliance in neighboring Mali, released a 25-minute video showing men confessing to spying for the Mauritanian intelligence service ([SITE](#), October 9).

Mauritania's efforts to tackle extremism have paid off, but the protests around Mkhaitir's trial are a reminder of a continued potential threat.

IRAQ: SPACE FOR CHANGE IN THE KRG

Alexander Sehmer

The fallout from the Iraqi Kurds' ill-judged independence referendum has seen the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) humbled and its Peshmerga fighters pushed out of territory they had captured from Islamic State (IS) in 2014. Having overplayed his hand, Masoud Barzani has stepped down as KRG president ([Kurdistan 24](#), October 29). Coming not long after the death of Barzani's longtime political rival, Jalal Talabani, there is the intriguing possibility of political change in northern Iraq.

In October, several weeks after Kurds turned out to vote overwhelmingly in favor of independence, Iraqi troops backed by Shia militia moved to re-take Kirkuk from the Kurds, recapturing the disputed city and taking back large areas of territory in Kirkuk and Nineveh provinces ([TRT World](#), October 19). Some clashes were reported, but overall the Iraqi forces advance met little resistance ([al-Jazeera](#), October 16). In many cases the Peshmerga had already withdrawn, the result of a deal with the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), the traditional rival to Barzani's Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP).

The deal likely came about as a result of Iranian intervention. Ahead of the advance, Iranian Quds Force commander Qassem Soleimani was reportedly in the PUK stronghold of Sulaimaniyah ([The National](#), October 16; [al-Monitor](#), October 17). Barzani later seized on this and the role of the Shia militia, complaining that the offensive on Kirkuk was "led by Iranians," and that the Kurds' U.S. and British allies were well aware of the fact ([al-Jazeera](#), November 8).

That Barzani misread the situation going into the referendum suggests he was poorly advised. The United States and the United Kingdom have both been clear that while they are willing to back the KRG financially and the Peshmerga forces militarily in the fight against IS, they do not support the KRG's quest for independence.

The PUK will have been pleased to see Barzani chastened over this. They had been only lukewarm to the idea of the referendum, while a third faction in Kurdish politics, the Gorran Movement, openly opposed it ([Rudaw](#), September 24). The question now is how the

Kurds move forward and whether a new set of leaders can mend the fractures in their political landscape.

However, wholesale change seems unlikely. Barzani himself will maintain a political role as part of the High Political Council, a body he established ahead of the referendum ([Rudaw](#), October 29). For the KRG leadership he is thought to favor his son Masrour, the KDP's spy chief. Prime Minister Nechirvan Barzani, his nephew, is another contender. Meanwhile, in the PUK, Talabani's son Bafel is becoming more prominent ([Rudaw](#), October 12). There seems to be a need for "new blood" in Kurdish politics, but where it will come from is unclear.

Hezbollah's Drone Program Sets Precedents for Non-State Actors

Elizabeth Santoro and Avery Plaw

On the afternoon of September 19, an unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV) launched from an airstrip near the Syrian capital of Damascus flew into the demilitarized zone that separates the Syrian-controlled area of the Golan Heights from that which is controlled by Israel. The Israeli military scrambled jets and launched a patriot missile to intercept what it identified as a Hezbollah drone approaching Israeli airspace. The Patriot missile, its flight accompanied by two Israeli fighter jets, successfully intercepted the drone in the air ([Haaretz](#), September 19). The debris fell inside the demilitarized zone, near the ruins of the Syrian city of Quneitra.

Despite the drone's prompt destruction, the incident further escalated rising tensions between Israel, Hezbollah and Iran, which reportedly supplied the drone to Hezbollah ([al-Jazeera](#), September 9).

Only a few weeks prior to the drone's deployment, Israel had staged its largest military drill in 20 years, in which it simulated a potential conflict with Hezbollah. The incident also came just hours prior to a scheduled speech to the United Nations by Binyamin Netanyahu, in which the Israeli prime minister was expected to discuss the increasing threat posed to Israel's northern border by Iran and its proxy, Hezbollah ([Times of Israel](#), September 17; [Haaretz](#), September 24).

This year Israel's Institute for National Security Studies declared Hezbollah to be the greatest threat to the country in its annual report ([The Middle East Eye](#), March 20). Although Hezbollah has been an enemy of Israel for decades, last year's report had ranked Iran as the number one threat. The change is due in no small part to Hezbollah's robust aerial drone program. Moreover, while this most recent drone deployment raises concerns about the possibility of bolder and more violent drone usage by the group, the incident is far from Hezbollah's first drone attack against Israel.

In fact, Hezbollah's growing fleet of UAVs has posed a relentlessly escalating threat to Israeli security over the

last 13 years, and the Syrian War has allowed the group to further develop and test its drones.

Developing Drone Technology

Hezbollah's first successful drone deployment took place in November of 2004, when the group deployed an Iranian made Mirsad-1 military-grade surveillance drone into Israeli airspace and surveilled Nabariva, a city in northern Israel, for about 20 minutes. This marked the first time a non-state actor had utilized aerial drones against a state, opening a new world of potential terrorist capabilities. Hezbollah has since remained the single most prolific and successful non-state user of aerial drones, continually establishing new precedents for non-state actors.

On October 6, 2012, for instance, Hezbollah deployed an Iranian Ayoub drone from Lebanon deep into Israel, to the city of Dimona, to surveil the country's nuclear weapons manufacturing facilities. The drone surveilled the plant for several hours before it was eventually shot down by an Israeli fighter plane. Several weeks after the attack, Iran released photographs of Israel's nuclear weapons plant that had been relayed by the drone. The incident served as a significant propaganda victory for both Hezbollah and Iran, indicating that Hezbollah could potentially attack even Israel's best-protected and most important facilities ([Jafria News](#), October 2012).

On September 21, 2014, Hezbollah launched an even more impressive drone operation, utilizing a UAV to attack the al-Qaeda-linked al-Nusra Front in Syria. The drone attack killed more than 20 of the group's fighters, which was more than the ensuing ground assault. By the conclusion of the attack, at least 23 al-Nusra operatives had been killed and several others were held captive by Hezbollah ([Times of Israel](#), September 21, 2014). This attack represents two momentous developments: the first time a non-state actor had carried out a deadly drone attack, and the first time a non-state actor had utilized drones to attack another non-state group. [1] After this, Hezbollah and Iran began to seriously invest in the expansion of Hezbollah's drone program.

Syria as Training Ground

One of the most notable facets of the Hezbollah drone program is the airbase Hezbollah currently operates. Located in northern Lebanon, the base was identified by

IHS Jane's using satellite imagery in 2015. It is comprised of a 2,200-foot unpaved runway, numerous sheds and an antenna that may be intended to enhance the range of a UAV ground control post. Experts speculate that the runway was designed specifically for Iranian UAVs, such as the Ababil-3 and the larger Shahed-129. The runway is relatively short, unpaved and surrounded by unforgiving mountainous terrain, making it nearly impossible for any manned aircraft to land on the airstrip.

The airstrip's existence illustrates Hezbollah's increasingly sophisticated air capabilities and its commitment to rapidly develop them. Furthermore, the fact that the airbase is located a mere 10 miles from the Syrian border implies that Hezbollah has long held intentions to utilize UAVs to try to influence the outcome of the Syrian War. UAVs are indeed becoming a more central weapon within Hezbollah's combat tactics and strategies ([Business Insider](#), April 24, 2015).

The Syrian War has functioned as a training and experimentation ground for Hezbollah. According to one Hezbollah fighter: "We are definitely learning a lot by working with Russians and Iranians in the Syria war and more specifically when it comes to UAV" ([The Middle East Eye](#), March 20).

Interestingly, however, Hezbollah has demonstrated a preference for cheaper commercially available drones over the military-grade drones they receive and assemble with Iranian assistance. Hezbollah is in fact infamous for using what journalist Nicholas Blanford terms "off-the-shelf drones for over-the-hill reconnaissance in Syria's battlefields" ([CSM](#), August 16, 2016).

Additionally, on August 9, 2016, a video was released on social media depicting a small commercially available quadcopter armed with two small Chinese-made MZD-2 sub-munition bombs attacking rebel positions in northern Syria. The video represents the first digital evidence that Hezbollah has the capability to bomb targets remotely ([Times of Israel](#), August 11, 2016). Earlier drone attacks were kamikaze-style missions.

Future Drone Operations

Hezbollah has led the way in the deployment and use of drones for non-state groups for more than a decade. Over that time, it has made frightening progress in the

acquisition of increasingly sophisticated UAVs, broadening the scope of its operations from simply menacing Israel to targeting non-state combatants.

In a matter of ten years, Hezbollah transitioned from having no drones at all to having their own airstrip and a fleet of military and upgraded commercial drone models. Hezbollah is now experienced in using drones for a variety of purposes — surveillance, propaganda manufacturing, kamikaze attacks and bombings — and has gained competency in operating drones in different terrains and countries (Israel and Syria).

How all will be realized in combat is difficult to say, but as Hezbollah has greatly expanded its UAV arsenal — including, but not limited to, the Mirsad, Ababil, Ayoub, and commercially available drones — in recent years, it is likely it will continue to utilize drones with increasing frequency and sophistication.

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NOTES

[1] See: Robert J Bunker, Terrorist and Insurgent Unmanned Aerial Vehicles: Use, Potentials and Military Implications, ([U.S. Army War College](#), August 2015)

Pakistan's Tanzeem-e-Islami and Its Troublesome Extremist Links

Farhan Zahid

A number of Pakistan's Islamist organizations that agitate for the establishment of an Islamic caliphate but profess to be non-violent are finding renewed prominence, a concerning result of the surfacing of Islamic State's (IS) local chapter, Wilayat-e-Khurasan.

Islamist organizations such as Hizb ut Tahrir, Jamaat ul Momineena and Tanzeem-e-Islami have large followings in Pakistan, operating across the country and based mainly in the country's major cities.

While the organizations and their ideologues often promote hate-speech, the organizations themselves claim to have no involvement in Islamist terrorist activities. Tanzeem-e-Islam, an organization that has long called for the establishment of an Islamic caliphate in Pakistan, states on its website: "We believe that an Islamic state can be established in Pakistan by means of a popular non-violent movement" and goes on to renounce violence, saying that "a coup d'etat can never produce a stable and positive change as it does not involve changing the beliefs and thoughts of the people."

Tanzeem is not a proscribed organization in Pakistan, but a number of its members have reportedly been arrested in connection with IS' Khurasan province and accused by the authorities of involvement in terrorist financing. Even after his death in 2010, radical speeches by Israr Ahmad, the founder of Tanzeem, still circulate online among jihadists, raising concerns that the group provides an entryway to Islamist extremism.

Ideology and Background

A qualified doctor who studied at King Edward Medical College in Lahore, Ahmad founded Tanzeem-e-Islami in 1975. He had been an active member of Islamist political party Jamaat-e-Islami, but parted ways with the group in 1957 over Jamaat's decision to participate in the electoral process, something Ahmad considered un-Islamic. Indeed, the Tanzeem founder remained a critic

of democracy and the electoral process until his death in 2010.

Through Tanzeem, Ahmad hoped to prepare Pakistani society for the eventual establishment of his longed-for caliphate and the imposition of sharia law. His most influential work, *Islamic Renaissance: The Real Task Ahead*, written in 1967, emphasizes the need to revitalize the Muslim faith, especially among educated Muslims, the importance of disseminating the Quranic message and the urgency of reinvigorating the faith of the Muslim masses ([Muslim Observer](#), April 2010).

Another important aspect of Ahmad's ideology was his belief in the notion that the spiritual nerve center of the Islamic intellectual movement had shifted from the Arab world to Pakistan, and that it was therefore imperative that the foundations for the caliphate be set down there ([Dawn](#), April 15, 2010).

Ahmad's teachings were frequently anti-Semitic, and he would often expound conspiracy theories about how Jews and Israel would attempt to destabilize Pakistani society. [2] As a respected speaker for many in Pakistan, by incorporating these things into his speeches he played an important role in the dissemination of anti-Semitic views through Pakistani society.

Since Ahmad did not believe in democracy and electoral politics, he fully supported the Islamist regime of military dictator General Zia ul Haq between 1977 and 1988. Ahmad was a compelling orator, and General Haq personally directed the state broadcaster to provide him with a prime time television slot, which he used to disseminate his radical views, including objecting to the broadcasting of cricket matches, which he considered un-Islamic and wayward.

Despite receiving the regime's support, Ahmad did not hesitate to use his show to express his irritation at the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, objecting to its policies that permitted women to appear on national television as newscasters and actors. He even proposed barring women from all professions, with the exception of medicine and teaching ([Dawn](#), February 14, 2013).

Militant Links

IS announced the establishment of its regional chapter, Wilayat-e-Khurasan, just two months after the fall of Mo-

sul in July 2014. Three Pakistani jihadist groups — Jun-dullah, Tehreek-e-Khilafat Pakistan and the Pakistani Taliban's Shahidullah faction — immediately pledged allegiance to IS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. A number of organizations in Afghanistan, such as the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, and various Chechen Islamists also joined the group.

In Pakistan, several urban cells associated with IS surfaced in the cities of Karachi, Lahore and Sialkot. Scores of terrorist attacks were perpetrated by these cells, especially in Karachi, prompting a security crackdown. In September last year, the Pakistani military announced it had arrested more than 300 IS militants across the country, including Hafiz Omar, the IS leader for Pakistan ([Xinhua](#), September 1, 2016). The authorities have provided no figures of how many of those were connected to Tanzeem, but the connection has been repeatedly made in the Pakistani media. It has become clear that at least some of the key perpetrators of various attacks were inspired by Ahmad's ideology and teachings and some even remained associated with Tanzeem.

Officials with the Karachi Counter Terrorism Department (CTD) claim the IS cell involved in the May 2015 massacre of 43 members of the Ismaili-Shia community at Safoora Goth, in Karachi had connections with Tanzeem. One of those accused of being a financier of one of the IS cells, Adil Masood Butt — who studied at New York's Fordham University and ran his own education business, the College of Accountancy and Management Sciences (CAMS), in Karachi — had been a member of Tanzeem but reportedly left the group to join al-Qaeda ([Friday Times](#), December 25, 2015). Butt joined Tanzeem in 2000 through Khalid Yousaf Bari and Sheeba Ahmad. ([Dawn](#), December 18, 2015) Two other alleged financiers of the same cell, Sheeba Ahmed and Khalid Yousaf Bari, were also associated with Tanzeem, according to reports ([Pakistan Today](#), September 17, 2015)

The CTD revealed that the mastermind of Safoora Goth massacre, Saad Aziz, was a business student at the Institute of Business Administration, one of Pakistan's most prestigious business schools. There he reportedly met Ali Rehman, a member of Tanzeem, who introduced him to the group and its ideology. Aziz later attended lectures organized by Tanzeem in Karachi that, as reportedly revealed by Aziz during interrogation, convinced him that "in Pakistan the root of all depraved activities is cor-

ruption and the only solution to this is violence” ([The Nation](#), August 25, 2015).

Entryway to Extremism

According to CTD Karachi’s Transnational Terrorist Intelligence Group, former Tanzeem members are also among militants with Jamaat ul Ansar al-Sharia Pakistan, a new al-Qaeda-linked group that has perpetrated a series of terrorist attacks in Karachi and Baluchistan province ([News International](#), September 7)

In September, the security forces arrested two men said to be leaders of the banned militant group Ansarul Shariah Pakistan. A former Karachi University teacher — identified as “Professor Mushtaq” — and his associate, Mufti Habibullah, were taken into custody after raids conducted by police in Quetta and Pishin districts of Baluchistan province. Both Habibullah and Mustaq are associated with Tanzeem, according to the CDT, with Habibullah running Tanzeem-affiliated madrasas in the Hyderabad district of Sindh province ([News International](#), September 7).

Last year, Pakistani security agencies requested Tanzeem change its pro-caliphate slogan, fearing it had backing from a banned (but unnamed in reports) group ([Nation, January 8, 2016](#)).

Tanzeem maintains an official position of non-violence. Nonetheless, a number of former members have reportedly been involved in terrorist activities perpetrated by cells affiliated with IS’ Wilayat-e-Khurasan and other Islamist militant groups. Pakistan’s policy makers should take note. While most of Tanzeem’s membership may remain peaceful activists, the group’s ideology concerns preparing individuals for the establishment of a caliphate in Pakistan. Its pro-caliphate, ultra-orthodox teachings are congruent with the ideology of militant Islamist groups.

Farhan Zahid writes on counter-terrorism, al-Qaeda, Pakistani al-Qaeda-linked groups, Islamic State, jihadi ideologies and the Afghan Taliban.

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[1] Ahmad’s speech is available on [YouTube](#) (published September 8, 2013).

Myanmar’s Tatmadaw and the Making of the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army

Zachary Abuza

Since August 25, Myanmar’s security forces have conducted what the United Nations (UN) has described as “a textbook case of ethnic cleansing” against Rohingya Muslims in Myanmar’s Rakhine state. It has forced more than 589,000 Rohingya civilians to flee to Bangladesh, killing an estimated 3,000 people and burning 288 Rohingya villages, according to rights groups and the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) ([Human Rights Watch](#), October 1).

Myanmar describes its actions in terms of counter-terrorism operations, but its response to the threat posed by Rohingya militants is disproportionate and is likely to fuel militancy for years to come.

Background

State violence against the Rohingya goes back decades, but the current anti-Muslim violence can be traced from June 2012, during the country’s democratic transition, when some 200 Rohingya were killed and over 100,000 were confined to Internally Displaced Persons (IDP) camps. By 2014, over 400,000 had fled to Bangladesh. The issue had been festering for years and stems from the fact the Rohingya are not listed as one of the country’s 135 legally-recognized ethnic groups, despite evidence they have lived in the country for generations. The military government stripped them of their citizenship rights in 1982, and has since referred to them as illegal “Bengali” immigrants ([al-Jazeera](#), September 28).

An armed movement, the Rohingya Solidarity Organization (RSO), was active in the mid-1980s to 1990s. The RSO did little militarily, but its ties to the Jamaat-e-Islami and Harkat-ul-Jihad-al Islami in Bangladesh and Pakistan caused concern ([Asia Times](#), September 21). The RSO had limited ties to al-Qaeda and affiliated charities ([Irawaddy](#), June 9). Indeed, al-Qaeda’s top representative in Southeast Asia at the time was in the process of bringing the RSO into an umbrella grouping with Jemaah Islamiyah and other groups, known as the Rabitatul Mujahidin. The proliferation of armed training camps

compelled Bangladeshi security forces to move against them. By the mid-2000s, the RSO was defunct, but a convenient enough myth for the government to justify its abusive policies.

The Rohingya had hoped that the country's democratic transition would address their legal rights. Yet democratic freedoms also unleashed extreme Buddhist nationalism. An active campaign of ethnic cleansing was underway in 2013 ([Human Rights Watch](#), April 22, 2013). Despite a massive exodus of people between 2012 and 2015 — some 112,000 people fled — the conflict was allowed to fester with little international attention. A February 2017 UN report that documented “mass gangrape, killings – including of babies and young children, brutal beatings, disappearances and other serious human rights violations by Myanmar's security forces” elicited little outcry ([OHCR](#), February 3).

The Emergence of Harakah al-Yaqin

In 2015, Attullah Abu Amar Jununi, also known as Hafiz Tohar, founded Harakah al-Yaqin (HAY), the Faith Movement, to “defend, save, and protect [the] Rohingya community ... in line with the principles of self-defense” ([ARSA](#), May 30).

Attullah was born in Karachi, Pakistan to Rohingya parents, and raised in Saudi Arabia, where he was a mosque employee. He moved to Bangladesh, crossing into Rakhine State in late 2015 or early 2016 via Pakistan ([Dhaka Tribune](#), October 20).

HAY spun out of the Aqa Mul Mujahideen (AMM, the Faith Movement of Arakan), which itself emerged from another organization, Harakat ul-Jihad Islami-Arakan, headed by Abdus Qadoos Burmi, a Rohingya from Pakistan.

RSO members, frustrated by their leaders' inaction, began to defect to HAY ([Dhaka Tribune](#), October 19). By 2015, HAY was actively recruiting and organizing in the refugee camps and pressing religious leaders to issue *fatwas* (religious decree) endorsing their leadership ([RSIS Commentary](#), October 18).

The statements that emerged from HAY in fall 2016 were Islamist in both tone and references. In a [video message](#) in October 2016, Attullah called on international supporters to join the HAY's jihad, saying: “If

you [Rohingya worldwide] want to save the honor of mothers and sisters of Arakan, if you want to save all the *masjid* and *madrastas* of Arakan from destruction [...] take part in this great jihad with us.” (YouTube [posting has since been taken down]).

HAY undertook small-scale ambushes to acquire weapons, but in October 2016 it staged its first major operation — 170 men in [coordinated attacks](#) on police posts that resulted in the death of nine border policemen. As one militant stated: “We did not have guns so we attacked them like a swarm of hornets shouting 'Al-lahu Akbar' wielding our sticks and machetes” and making off with more than 50 weapons and ammunition ([France 24](#), September 1; [BBC](#), October 9).

In HAY/ARSA's October 2016 video, the most common firearms on display were old British Enfield carbines; those with the more modern AK-47 variants looked to be in Attullah's personal security detail ([YouTube](#), August 27). The vast majority of the several hundred men wielded nothing more than machetes, swords and spears.

Nonetheless, the attack caught the government by surprise. Myanmar's military, known as the Tatmadaw, responded with pogroms, including attacks on civilians and acts of arson. The UN estimated that violence in October-November 2016 led to some 87,000 Rohingya refugees crossing into Bangladesh ([ReliefWeb](#), August 21).

In early 2017, HAY rebranded itself as the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA), ostensibly to appear less Islamist and more as a legitimate ethno-nationalist group fighting in self-defense. Its public statements have been stripped of Islamist language. But make no mistake, ARSA has continued to recruit through its network of clerics and mosques, and there is a far more religious basis to the movement than they publicly admit ([Asia Times](#), October 31).

ARSA's stated political goals are limited to the restoration of citizenship and legal protections of its people. In his first interview, Attullah said that ARSA would fight until “citizenship rights were reinstated.” To date, ARSA has not espoused secession or the establishment of an Islamic state or caliphate.

On August 18, 2017, Attullah released a 19-minute video statement justifying ARSA's actions, stating that his group was established only in response to government and paramilitary abuses against the Rohingya community. "Our primary objective under ARSA is to liberate our people from dehumanized oppression perpetrated by all successive Burmese regimes," he said ([RFA](#), August 25).

He went out of his way to state that the group is independent, with no ties to any international terrorist organization. He also called on the Rohingya diaspora to support ARSA, but to "obey and abide by the laws of the land" of their host countries.

The August 25 Attacks: Reasons and Repercussions

Two days after UN Special Representative Kofi Annan issued his report on the Myanmar government's mishandling of the Rohingya, some 150-200 ARSA militants attacked nearly 30 police posts in pre-dawn operations ([Reuters](#), August 24; [Channel News Asia](#), August 26). ARSA stated the attacks were pre-emptive, though they were clearly meant to secure more weapons ([Asia Times](#), August 28).

Some 77 militants and 13 police were killed in the fighting. The Tatmadaw may have been tipped off about the attacks, possibly allowing them to go ahead in order to justify their own offensive, but one officer acknowledged he had been "surprised they attacked across such a wide geographical area" ([Channel News Asia](#), September 7; [Dhaka Tribune](#), October 18). The military chief openly talked about the "clearance operation" being "unfinished business" ([Dhaka Tribune](#), September 3).

HAY/ARSA knew all too well that the Myanmar military's response would be heavy handed. This is the self-fulfilling prophecy of extremists; it is also a calculated and cynical ploy. Only people with nothing left to lose would be willing to defy the odds and join a poorly funded group against the Myanmar military, currently the 11th largest in the world, with its long track record of repression against ethnic minorities.

Yet the scope of the full-blown, two-month long campaign of ethnic cleansing, with even senior officials in the government of de facto leader Aung San Suu Kyi justifying the military's attacks on civilians, seems to have caught ARSA off guard.

Following the attack, ARSA issued a brief statement saying that the raids were a "legitimate step" to defend and restore their rights, a message that was reinforced by Attullah's videos on August 27 and 28 ([ARSA](#), August 24; [YouTube](#), August 28). "After the lapse of 11 months, there is no sign to honor human rights to Rohingyas, rather the Burmese government and brutal military regime increased their atrocities against Rohingya (in commission of the last stage of genocide)." [sic]

He warned that "we have no other options but to engage in war" and condemned the military for the pogroms and denial of basic humanitarian aid. He made clear, that the Tatmadaw was fueling the insurgency: "You will never achieve your goals through committing atrocities ... If you engage in a war, do it with us, ARSA, not with vulnerable children and women."

Many Rohingya communities resisted ARSA's entreaties. As one villager said: "They [ARSA] came at night. We refused to accept the terrorists' mobilization. Our committee rejected them in their approach" ([Irawaddy](#), September 8).

Another said: "These regular farmers-turned-fighters with few weapons will bring nothing but more woe to Rohingya Muslims" ([AFP](#), September 1). One alleged fighter said 52 of his comrades were killed in the October 25 raids. "It was a big mistake. If ARSA hadn't launched its attacks, the military wouldn't have reacted as it did. And there wouldn't be nearly half a million refugees here" ([NPR](#), October 4).

As another ARSA member complained: "We had only knives and sticks, no guns. They promised us AK-47s, but we got nothing. The explosives didn't work. We had two of them for the whole group, but when we threw them nothing happened" ([Bangkok Post](#), October 5)

ARSA also stands to benefit from the precariousness of life for Rohingya refugees. For the more than one million people living in squalid refugee camps where violent gangs prey on people, there is an incentive to join militants like ARSA because it accords them and their families a degree of security and additional resources. Joining HAY/ARSA is now becoming *farj* (a religious obligation) ([South China Morning Post](#), August 29).

International Ties

The Myanmar government officially labeled ARSA as “extremist Bengali terrorists,” warning that its goal is to establish an Islamic state. Despite the Saudi Arabian and Pakistani roots of ARSA, to date, there is insufficient evidence to prove that ARSA has any ties to the transnational jihadist community.

The plight of the Rohingya has been referenced by international jihadists in the past, but always in passing. Abdullah Azzam, the preacher who inspired Osama Bin Laden, raised the Rohingya issue in the 1980s ([Twitter](#), September 3). Al-Qaeda showed cursory interest in the 1990s. In the July 2014 speech in which he declared the establishment of a caliphate, IS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi referenced the Rohingya as among “oppressed” Muslim populations worldwide that IS was looking to defend ([Benar News](#), June 11, 2015). [1] In 2016, the alleged chief of IS in Bangladesh, [Sheikh Abu Ibrahim al-Hanif](#), said in a *Dabiq* interview that IS sought to turn Bangladesh into a launching pad for attacks in India and Myanmar ([Benar News](#), April 15, 2016).

HuJI-Arakan leaders have been photographed on the stage with Lashkar e-Taiba (LET) leaders, including Hafiz Said ([Mizzima](#), September 5). The LET’s charitable arms, Jamat ud Dawa and Falah-i-Insaniat Foundation support the Rohingya refugees in Pakistan and Bangladesh ([Economic Times](#), October 25, 2016). Indian and Bangladeshi security forces believe that the AMM received funding and support from Pakistan’s ISI via the LET ([South China Morning Post](#), September 1). Reports — primarily attributed to Indian intelligence — suggest ties between the AMM and Jamaat-ul-Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB), the pro-IS affiliate that staged the [2016 Holey Artisan Bakery siege](#), in which 21 people were killed ([Mizzima](#), September 5).

In his August 18, 2017 video, Attullah denied any links to the IS and called on fellow Rohingya not to be seduced into joining terrorist organizations. Likewise, Attullah is reported to have eschewed support from Pakistani-based militants. Beyond ideological differences, ARSA has every reason to distance itself from transnational jihadist groups, which would compel Bangladeshi security forces to move against them.

Clearly the plight of the Rohingya resonates amongst the Muslim public in the region. The Myanmar govern-

ment’s pogroms saw mass demonstrations in Bangladesh, Malaysia and Indonesia. Protesters threw a Molotov cocktail at the Burmese embassy in Jakarta on September 2, while Indonesian Islamists recently uploaded videos exhorting volunteers to join the jihad in Myanmar, although there is no evidence that recruits have been dispatched ([Straits Times](#), September 3). A video, based on still photos from 2013, appeared on a JI/al-Qaeda website in Indonesia, but did not actually depict ARSA ([arrahmah.com](#), July 10).

While ARSA has no known ties to IS or al-Qaeda, there is a concern about groups perpetrating terrorist acts in their name. Indonesian authorities have broken up two separate terrorist plots by pro-IS militants to blow up the Myanmar embassy in Jakarta. The most recent, a plot by Jamaah Ansharut Daulah, the leading IS organization, was in November 2016. In particular, there is concern about the Rohingya diaspora in Pakistan and the Gulf being radicalized.

Al-Qaeda’s general leadership issued a statement in September 2017 describing attacks against the Rohingya as part of an ongoing global campaign against Muslims conducted “under the guise of fighting terrorism,” and stated that it was an “individual” religious and legal obligation under sharia to come to their defense ([Channel News Asia](#), 14 September).

The statement called on Muslims to “set out for Burma, and to make the necessary preparations — training and the like — to resist oppression against their Muslim brothers, and to secure their rights, which will only be returned to them by the use of force.” Al-Qaeda called on Myanmar to be punished for its crimes.

In late October 2017, the leader of al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS), Abu Syed al-AnsarI, urged followers in a video statement to abandon demonstrations and actively engage in jihad on behalf of the Rohingya. At the same time, Bangladeshi security forces arrested four JMB militants plotting an aircraft-based terrorist attack, though it is unclear if the attack was to be carried out in the name of the Rohingya ([Benar News](#), October 31)

As IS and al-Qaeda compete, they will continue to raise the plight of the Rohingya in their media, but the broader question is will they act in the name of the Rohingya as they attempt to outbid each other.

There has been a surge in arrests of Bangladeshi nationals across the region in connection with other pro-IS groups, including in Singapore, Malaysia and the Philippines (IPAC, May 8). In December 2016, Malaysian authorities arrested an Indonesian, who had received bomb training, en route to Myanmar to join the Rohingya ([The Star](#), December 20, 2016). More recently they stopped one of their own nationals ([Channel News Asia](#), 14 September).

Indian authorities believe that AQIS has been active in supporting the Rohingya insurgency and recently arrested a suspected al-Qaeda operative. Bangladeshi security services have stepped up their scrutiny of the refugee camps and have recently recovered caches of small arms ([Indian Express](#), January 6).

Information Operations

HAY/ARSA has a sophisticated online information campaign — using Facebook (briefly), Twitter (@ARSA_Official), Blogspot and several video-hosting websites — through which it distributes video and audio material in Rohingya, Bengali, Arabic, Urdu, English, and Burmese. [2] For its own followers, ARSA's leadership relies on closed WhatsApp channels to communicate and recruit. Its so-called "ARSA.G1" is run out of Saudi Arabia. Another channel is run out of Malaysia.

The public nature of its information operations suggests that it has intentionally embarked on a strategy to win support from the international community, embracing the UN and other international monitoring and fact-finding missions ([ARSA](#), July 3). Yet, Attullah has not been in a video statement since August 2017.

The September 10 declaration of a month-long unilateral ceasefire ([ARSA](#), September 10) was smart, keeping the attention of the international community on the egregious human rights abuses of the Tatmadaw at a time when a militarily weak ARSA needed to lie low. In a statement on October 7, ARSA offered to unilaterally extend its ceasefire if the government reciprocated and allowed international humanitarian agencies unimpeded access to northern Rakhine state. The government spokesman and Tatmadaw leadership were quick to dismiss the offer stating that they would not "negotiate with terrorists" ([Irawaddy](#), October 9).

Where to now?

To date, over 50 percent of the Rohingya population in Rakhine has fled to Bangladesh. The government of Aung San Suu Kyi is impervious to international pressure, despite high-level interventions by Malaysia and Indonesia. The military lived for decades under crippling sanctions, and has obviously calculated the economic and diplomatic costs into their decision-making.

Government operations against HAY/ARSA and the Rohingya population will continue. The government created a Catch-22 situation, stating that only those refugees who have proof of citizenship can return, knowing all too well that it stripped their citizenship in 1982. Hardline Buddhist clergy have called on Buddhists to defend themselves in firebrand sermons and put pressure on the government to refuse to allow the refugees to return ([Facebook](#), August 30).

ARSA has said that there would be "open war" and "continued [armed] resistance" until full citizenship rights are restored. The Myanmar government and military are unlikely to accede to that demand.

ARSA's military capabilities remain paltry. There have been no military operations for over two months, and it is unlikely there will be any in the immediate future. ARSA will focus on recruitment and indoctrination, followed by establishing small units and engaging in rudimentary military training. The degree to which they can do this is dependent on the Bangladeshi government. Bangladesh has accused the Myanmar government of committing "genocide" ([Benar News](#), September 11). Giving ARSA space is one of the only points of leverage it has to get the Myanmar government to take back even some Rohingya.

The paucity of Rohingya left in Rakhine could prove advantageous to ARSA, which may be less fearful of retaliation and hence more emboldened in attacks. There will likely be attacks on Buddhist civilians, especially as such assaults would not require military-grade arms.

This is the start of a generational conflict. While HAY/ARSA will never be a match for the Tatmadaw, nor a viable threat to the territorial integrity of Myanmar, they can still draw out a low-level insurgency, possibly for decades. ARSA's hopes that the international community is willing and able to deliver them full legal protections

are likely misplaced. That portends a more radical course of action in the future.

Zachary Abuza is a professor at the National War College where he focuses on Southeast Asian security issues. The views expressed here are the author's and do not reflect the position of the US Department of Defense, the National Defense University, or the National War College.

NOTES

[1] The comments referred to by al-Baghdadi: "It is enough for you to just look at the scenes that have reached you from Central Africa, and from Burma before that. What is hidden from us is far worse. So by Allah, we will take revenge! By Allah, we will take revenge! Even if it takes a while, we will take revenge, and every amount of harm against the ummah will be responded to with multitudes more against the perpetrator."

[2] There are a number of online video outlets that promote its cause. The Saudi-Arabian based [Arakan New Agency's](#) website is in English and Arabic with its own [YouTube channel](#) and productions in Rohingya, English, Urdu, Burmese and Arabic. Another Saudi Arabian-based website, [Arakan Times](#), also distributes news and graphic details of human rights abuses in English and Burmese. It too runs a [YouTube channel](#). A third YouTube channel, [Arakan News TV](#), is run out of Bangladesh.