

Opinion – Addressing the Regional Security Risks of Rohingya Camps

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SHAFI MD MOSTOFA, MAY 7 2023

On April 14th, there was an incident in Ukhiya, Cox's Bazar, where the Police engaged in a firefight with members of The Arakan Salvation Army (ARSA), an armed group from Myanmar. During the altercation, a passerby named Noor Haba was shot by ARSA, and a member of ARSA was shot dead by the police. Two policemen were injured, and one person was arrested with a weapon in connection to the incident. ARSA also came into the spotlight on March 7th, 2023, when a commander of ARSA was killed in a Rohingya camp in Ukhiya upazila by unknown assailants.

ARSA gained global attention last year when Mohibullah, a prominent Rohingya leader, was killed in one of the refugee camps in Cox's Bazar. Mohibullah's brother Habibullah claimed that ARSA might have been responsible, as they were angered by his advocacy of a peaceful non-violent approach to resolving the Rohingya crisis, although ARSA denied any involvement in the killing. It seems that ARSA has been active in the camps.

Originally known as Harakah al-Yaqin, meaning Faith Movement in Arabic, and later as the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army, the latest militant group among the Rohingya people is commonly referred to as ARSA. ARSA is led by Ataulah abu Ammar Jununi, also known as Ata Ullah, believed to be a Rohingya born in Pakistan who spent much of his life in Saudi Arabia. Ata Ullah became politically active due to media reports of ongoing human rights abuses against the Rohingya community and the mass detention of Rohingya people in concentration camps after the 2012 violence. The early financiers of ARSA are not well known, but the International Crisis Group suggests that funding may come from a committee of supporters in Mecca and Medina, although their identities remain unclear.

While ARSA's direct affiliation with any Islamist militant organizations remains unconfirmed, various local and transnational Islamist organizations have attempted to exploit their grievances. The extent to which Rohingyas have responded to these calls is still uncertain. However, there are indications that Rohingyas may pose a potential threat not only to the peace and security of Bangladesh but also to South Asia as a whole.

First and foremost, the camps have seen the active presence of ARSA, as they have been involved in various operations. However, this has led to incidents where members of ARSA have been killed by security forces. Such active presence of ARSA in the camps is highly detrimental to the overall situation.

Moreover, there have been arrests of members belonging to a newly emerged Islamist militant organization, *Jama'atul Ansar Fil Hindal Sharqiya* in the Rohingya camps. These individuals have been found to have affiliations with Al Qaeda, which indicates that not only are online provocations taking place, but also physical contacts are being established by Al Qaeda within the camps. It is evident that AQ has been inciting the Rohingya population for some time, and they have a specific ideology for the South Asian region known as *Gazwatul Hind* (Conquest of India). This shows that AQ's influence and activities in the camps go beyond mere online provocations.

Additionally, there are increasing concerns about the vulnerability of Rohingyas being exploited for criminal activities, including smuggling, drug trafficking, murder, and other small crimes. A special report compares crime statistics from 2021 and 2022 in and around the Rohingya camps. The report reveals that there were 77 reported incidents of theft in 2021, slightly decreasing to 75 in 2022. Similarly, the number of shootings decreased from 51 in 2021 to 18 in

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2022. The report also highlights a decrease in kidnappings, with 173 cases in 2021 compared to 86 in 2022. However, inter-conflicts increased from 11 incidents in 2021 to one in 2022. Drug-related cases remained high, with 268 cases in 2021 and 249 in 2022. Most concerning is the significant increase in murders, with 22 reported cases in 2021 and a sharp rise to 42 in 2022. Additionally, there were 567 other crimes reported in 2021, slightly decreasing to 553 in 2022.

Furthermore, there has been a growing trend of Rohingya refugees engaging in the small-arms trade. Law enforcement agencies in Cox's Bazar have arrested several Rohingya arms traders since 2017. It's worth noting that the illegal arms trade in Cox's Bazar and the adjacent region of Chittagong predates the arrival of Rohingya refugees and persists beyond the confines of the refugee camps. Cox's Bazar has become a strategic route for arms smugglers to reach potential buyers in India and Nepal, as it offers a more direct route compared to navigating through the challenging mountainous terrain of northern Myanmar. This easy access to weapons raises concerns about the potential for fostering Rohingya militancy in the region.

Finally, the complex geopolitical tensions in the Indo-Pacific have further complicated the issue of Rohingya repatriation, making it expensive. China is urging Bangladesh to adopt a neutral stance and join its Global Development Initiative (GDI) and Global Security Initiative (GSI), while the U.S. and India are encouraging Bangladesh to join the Quad. There are indications of close links between China and the Myanmar junta, and the recent tensions along the Bangladesh border may be a signal of China's ability to create trouble for Bangladesh via Myanmar. At the same time, the U.S. is expanding its diplomatic efforts in South Asia, shifting focus from Pakistan and India to countries like Bangladesh, Nepal, and Myanmar, as evidenced by the Burma Act which supports democracy activists, humanitarian assistance, and reconciliation efforts in the region. These geopolitical tensions are likely to further delay the repatriation process, and international actors may also leverage grievances to pursue their own goals.

The situation in the Rohingya camps is complex and multi-faceted, with various factors contributing to the potential threat that Rohingyas may pose to the peace and security of Bangladesh and South Asia. The presence of militant organizations, the involvement of extremist groups, the vulnerability to criminal exploitation, the small-arms trade, and the geopolitical tensions in the region are all factors that need to be addressed comprehensively to mitigate the potential security risks associated with the Rohingya crisis. It is essential for all stakeholders to work towards finding sustainable solutions that address the grievances of Rohingyas and ensure their safety, security, and well-being, while also addressing the security concerns and challenges posed by the situation in the camps.

About the author:

Shafi Md Mostofa (PhD) is a theologian and security studies scholar with broad interests in political Islam, authoritarianism, modern South Asian history and politics, and international relations and the clash of civilizations. He is an Associate Professor of World Religions and Culture at Dhaka University's Faculty of Arts and an Adjunct Lecturer at the University of New England, Australia. He has published with Routledge, Springer, Cambridge University Press, Oxford University Press, SAGE, Brill, Wiley and Blackwell; and in *Politics and Religion*, *Politics and Policy*, *Perspectives on Terrorism*, *Diaspora Studies*, and *Asian and African Studies*. He is the author of "Islamist Militancy in Bangladesh: A Pyramid Root Cause Model" (Cham, Springer) and "Dynamics of Violent Extremism in South Asia: Nexus between State Fragility and Extremism" (Singapore, Palgrave Macmillan). He is also a guest editor of the *Journal of World Affairs*, SAGE.