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## Spin, lies and social media obscure crisis in Myanmar

The government and ethnic Rohingya insurgents are competing to command the narrative about recent violence in conflict-ridden Rakhine State

By **DAVID SCOTT MATHIESON**

SEPTEMBER 1, 2017



A Rohingya man carrying his belongings approaches the Bangladesh-Myanmar border in Bandarban, an area under Cox's Bazar authority, Bangladesh, August 29, 2017. Photo: Reuters/Mohammad Ponir Hossain

As armed conflict escalates in Myanmar's western Rakhine State following attacks by ethnic Rohingya militants against state security forces, the war of words is raging in state media, at military press conferences and over social media.

The nature of truth in Rakhine State has always been hotly contested, with hyperbolic narratives constructed by all sides often in a state-imposed void of access for independent media or researchers to ascertain hard facts.

The newly emergent armed group known as the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA) staged armed attacks on an estimated 30 police outposts and an army regimental base in the Rakhine Townships of Maungdaw, Buthidaung and Yathedaung on August 25, timed to coincide with the previous day's release of the long-anticipated Kofi Annan-led Rakhine Advisory Commission report.

Twelve policemen, a soldier and civilian officials were casualties in the original attack, with state media estimating over 100 suspected militants were also killed. The Myanmar military, or Tatmadaw, deployed hundreds more troops to the area and resumed a violent 'area clearance operation', similar to the one mounted after October 9, 2016 attacks by Rohingya militants on border police outposts.

In the last week, the International Organization on Migration (IOM) has estimated over 20,000 Rohingya have crossed into Bangladesh, joining an estimated 87,000 who fled over the past several months. Several thousand ethnic Rakhine, Myanmar, and Mro have been evacuated or fled to the Rakhine state capital of Sittwe, or are internally displaced in the area.

Rohingya refugees walk along the Kutupalang Unregistered Refugee Camp, in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh, August 30, 2017.  
Photo: Reuters/Mohammad Ponir Hossain

The government alleges that ARSA's Muslim fighters have attacked several villages and staged massacres of Mro and Hindu people, including the slashing deaths of several children, and have set fire to many Buddhist and Hindu homes. Human Rights Watch released satellite imagery showing extensive arson in the area, with some government officials estimating over 2,500 houses have been torched.

The government quickly designated ARSA a terrorist organization under the hitherto unused Counter-Terrorism Law of 2014. In one of the more curious official statements of recent days, entitled “Warning in Relation with Extremist Terrorists”, the government warned that foreigners may be assisting ARSA and that all references to its members should label them as “extremist terrorists” rather than “insurgents.”

The government and autonomous military have orchestrated a major public relations drive to capitalize on ARSA’s attacks, with press conferences held by the military’s Psychological Warfare Department for defense attaches and media in Naypyitaw. A briefing this week for diplomats and journalists held in Yangon by Minister of Home Affairs Lt-Gen Kyaw Swe and National Security Advisor U Thaung Tun pledged security forces would operate with “maximum restraint.”

State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi’s office’s Information Committee on Rakhine Affairs has maintained an active Facebook page providing updates on events for several months. It was inexplicably renamed simply the ‘Information Committee’ this week. Since August 25, it has produced a series of “Latest News on Rakhine ARSA Extremist Terrorists News”, with a mix of detailed conflict reports on militant attacks, killings, injuries and captured supplies of suspected militant bases.

Myanmar State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi (R) confers with members of her delegation at the United Nations General Assembly on September 21, 2016. Photo: Reuters/Carlo Allegri



But photos disseminated by the Information Committee of international relief supplies supposedly captured by militants represented an information war low point. The government has long staged a theater of seizure and display to illustrate insurgent activity in the country, laying out purportedly captured items as evidence of violent plots or attack aftermath, including rows of captured weapons, bullets, *jingalees* (sharpened bicycle spokes used with a slingshot) and crude pipe bombs.

Yet recent photos posted on the State Counsellor's Information Committee site showing allegedly captured World Food Program (WFP) sacks, and, absurdly, basic improvised explosive device (IED) pipe bombs allegedly made from aid organization supplies were crudely constructed shams of evidence designed not to convince but inflame domestic sentiment and demonstrate belligerence towards the foreign aid community.

The US Embassy and United Nations have condemned these alarming allegations, made strategically as concerns of a massive humanitarian crisis mount. Given the see-saw of forced migration of Rohingya from Myanmar into Bangladesh for many decades, WFP and other relief agencies have been present in Maungdaw for at least 20 years assisting the local population, often in a near total void of government services.

Finding ostentatiously labelled relief supplies in various areas of Rakhine State is thus not difficult. The government allegations will seriously undermine the humanitarian neutrality of international aid operations, and frustrate the urgently needed resumption of humanitarian assistance for all people in the conflict area, regardless of their ethnicity.

Hindu villagers who fled violence at a temporary internally displaced persons (IDP) camp in Maungdaw, Myanmar August 30, 2017. Photo: Reuters/Soe Zeya Tun



It is unclear how much control Suu Kyi has over this disruptive messaging, and whether presidential spokesman Zaw Htay, who served the same role in the previous military-backed regime, is instead the true driving force. Many observers view Suu Kyi as sidelined by the Tatmadaw's control over access to Maungdaw and the information emanating from the conflict area.

More analysis is needed on how the military and security forces are managing those information flows, instead of simply denouncing the civilian government. But Suu Kyi as de facto national leader will ultimately have to take responsibility for the official messaging, including the use of racist labels, demonizing of international aid organizations and threats made to the independent media.

There have doubtless been frequent exaggerations and misleading reporting in the international media, influenced by a lack of access and reliable information sources, and the government likely feels besieged by widespread foreign condemnation of its widely reported rights abuses in the area.

Pro-Rohingya social media traffic likewise trades in exaggerations, half-truths and fabricated videos and photos of security force-perpetuated abuses. Once again, establishing the truth behind the violence in northern Rakhine State is hampered by the desperate dissemination of fake news on both sides.

ARSA, too, has pursued a relatively sophisticated public relations strategy for several months, targeting Western journalists on Twitter, releasing statements in English and pushing its moderate message of wanting to live peacefully alongside ethnic Rakhine, while calling for the United Nations to help them end long-standing crimes against humanity against their ethnic brethren.

A police officer on patrol in Maungdaw, northern Rakhine state, Myanmar August 30, 2017. Photo: Reuters/Soe Zeya Tun



An ARSA spokesman told Asia Times that its coordinated attacks last week were 'preemptive', as the Tatmadaw was planning strikes in the Mayu mountain range against its remote bases and training areas.

This is likely a diversionary tactic, however, as Myanmar security forces had deployed a few hundred troops into the area weeks ago in response to a spike in killings of suspected government informants and the slaughter of several Mro Buddhists in the area, both the suspected work of ARSA.

Military commander-in-chief Senior General Min Aung Hlaing was beseeched by Rakhine political and religious leaders to augment security in the area in response to the attacks. The ARSA spokesman also told Asia Times that the Rohingya were in “the final stage before full-fledged genocide, so we have to defend our civilian population.”

A government investigation into the post-October 9 violence last year strongly denied any evidence of genocide, a view widely shared internationally. But the one-sided report also ruthlessly dismissed strong evidence of widespread sexual violence, extrajudicial killings and arson attacks in the area by security forces. The callous denial has stoked international frustration and calls for a proper outside independent investigation.

These increasingly corrosive counter-narratives are obstructing not just the establishment of the facts on the ground in Rakhine State, but are shredding the potential for reconciliatory policy solutions to resolve the conflict as it quickly expands to the sum of all fears many have predicted: from grinding repression to all-out war.

*David Scott Mathieson is a Yangon-based independent analyst*

## Ken Nguyen

September 2, 2017 at 1:30 AM

USA created ARSA!

## Matt Moore

September 2, 2017 at 4:48 AM

As far as I know, the information committee includes members from Ministries of Defence, Internal Affairs, President's Office, State Counselor's Office, Border Security and Foreign Affairs. The committee verify the news, events and facts with the people involved and release to the public.

Some Myanmar people learned from the last year's events and I think they are trying to counter Islamic propaganda which is taking advantage of the corrupt media.

I don't think Myanmar government is accusing anyone, but just releasing the facts. Didn't see any condemnation, instead saw the UN World Food Program statement (<https://www.wfp.org/news/news-release/wfp-statement>) saying that the manipulation of food assistance destined for needy families as theft. Btw, do you know where the aids come from and do you think all NGOs are perfectly neutral? Locals know them better.

Do you also think all the people in UN are trustworthy? There are many Muslims e.g. UNHRC Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein, and there are criticisms of being biased.

Islam permits lying to deceive unbelievers and bring world domination. Muslims lie when it is in their interest to do so and “Allah” will not hold them accountable for lying when it is beneficial to the cause of Islam. They can lie without any guilt or fear of accountability or retribution. A lie in the defense of Islam is approved even applauded in their “holy” books.

What Al Jazeera is doing is just that and some other prominent media e.g. The Independent, and some journalists or rights activists are helping Islamic strategists, probably with handsome benefits.

For western Rakhine case, in the interviews in Cox Bazaar side, you can see people acting as if for a film following a script taught to them. But, heard that, when the government side request those people to provide information/details for investigations, no concrete evidence or details could be given.

## Andy Skipper

September 2, 2017 at 7:11 AM

Thank you for saying the truth. But sadly the whole world believing blindly in liars.

## Syeda Rahnuma Disha

September 3, 2017 at 3:28 AM

bad report, a hypothetical one. reporter could interview Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh.

## Robin Peter

September 3, 2017 at 10:34 AM

That's your side of the story, AT. Hope you have a clear conscience.

## Robin Peter

September 3, 2017 at 10:36 AM

Please come up with news that is credible.

## Colin Hinshelwood

September 3, 2017 at 2:18 PM

good analysis

## Thein Maung

September 3, 2017 at 4:38 PM

INFORMATION JIHAD OR TAQIYA:

JIHADI TERROR IN RAKHINE STATE, MYANMAR

(Deception by global Muslim countries and organizations (OIC) and western "regressive left" mass media with complicity from UN, International Organization on Migration (IOM), WFP and "human rights" organizations )

Bengali Islamic (so called Rohingya) terrorists joined by local Muslims are killing Buddhists and Hindus by the thousands in Rakhine state, Myanmar. Myanmar army (Tamadaw) has not been deployed to counter Islamic terrorism or even protect the Buddhists and Hindus. Only a small police force exists to protect the Buddhists and Hindus, and the police stations themselves have been under constant attack. Buddhists and Hindus have left their ancestral homes and villages and sought refuge in towns that are also under siege by the terrorists.

Yet the Bengali Islamic (so called Rohingya) terrorists are portraying themselves as victims and gaining unquestionable acceptance from western mainstream media (AP, Reuters, BBC, NPR, New York Times, LA Times, Washington Post, etc.). Western mainstream media (regressive left) have failed to report that UN and western NGOs under the control of Islamists and OIC have been supplying provisions to the Bengali Islamic terrorists. These provisions were accidentally discovered by local people in the mountainous area in the training camps of Bengali Islamic terrorists.

The political arm of the terrorists (Muslim Ummah or Caliphate) with finance from your petro\$\$ located in Riyadh, Ankara, Karachi, London, New York, Kuala Lumpur, etc. have prepared all types of misinformation and fake news and distributed around the globe. Muslims are taught in their "holy books" to employ deception called "Taqiya" in Jihad. Thus, even Breitbart came out supporting the Bengali Islamic terrorists.

Previous fake news produced by Muslims have been debunked time and again. Yet they still resort to the same tactics – Taqiya.

<https://www.scribd.com/document/138218972/Manipulative-Deceptive-Fraudulent-Media>

IF BENGALI ISLAMIC (SA CALLED ROHINGYA) TERRORISTS, THE PERPETRATORS OF TERROR IN RAKHINE STATE, ARE THE VICTIMS ..... THAN I WOULD BELIEVE THAT NAZIS TOO ARE THE VICTIMS OF HOLOCAUST .....

## Thein Maung

September 3, 2017 at 4:58 PM

Taqiyya – Saying something that isn't true as it relates to the Muslim identity.

The Quran says in several places that Allah is the best at deceiving people.

The near absence of Quranic verses and reliable Hadith that encourage truthfulness (Thou shall tell the truth..) is somewhat surprising.

Quran (3:54) – "And they (the disbelievers) schemed, and Allah schemed (against them): and Allah is the best of schemers." The Arabic word used here for scheme (or plot) is makara, which literally means 'deceit'. If Allah is supremely deceitful toward unbelievers, then there is little basis for denying that Muslims are allowed to do the same. (See also 8:30 and 10:21)

Sahih Bukhari (52:269) – "The Prophet said, 'War is deceit.'" The context of this is thought to be the murder of Usayr ibn Zarim and his thirty unarmed companions by Muhammad's men after they were "guaranteed" safe passage

Sahih Bukhari (49:857) – "He who makes peace between the people by inventing good information or saying good things, is not a liar." Lying is permitted when the end justifies the means.

## 林台生

September 3, 2017 at 6:45 PM

Spin, lies and social media obscure everything.

Not just crisis in Myanmar.

## Saleem Ibrahim Kapoorwala

September 3, 2017 at 8:01 PM

The reporter is working for the Burmese terrorist army

## Boontee Tan

September 4, 2017 at 3:12 AM

Nobody outside Myanmar seems to know exactly what has really happened in the conflict-ridden Rakhine state. Lies and cover-ups fill the air. How preposterous.

## Benny Paul

September 4, 2017 at 7:05 AM

Soe Moe Did u train then.

## Aysar Odeh

September 4, 2017 at 4:30 PM

This article is all spin and lies with a Jewish author justifying a Muslim holocaust. Exhibit A are the attacked villages and staged massacres referenced that have been confirmed to be the work of Mro and Hindu terrorists against these Muslim villages.

## Tan Chee Hong

September 10, 2017 at 2:35 PM

To understand the conflict, go back to 1942.

**Comments are closed.**

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