

## ***Myanmar (Burma): Extremism & Counter-Extremism***

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On December 11, 2019, Daw Aung San Suu Kyi took to the podium at the International Criminal Court to defend Myanmar against accusations of genocide, arguing that there had been no orchestrated campaign of persecution against Myanmar's Rohingya community. Aung San Suu Kyi did not directly address the atrocities by Myanmar's military and associated mobs that were described the day before—summary killings, babies thrown to their deaths, mass rapes, whole villages burned to cinders—all amply documented by the United Nations and human rights groups. Thousands of Rohingya have been killed and three quarters of a million driven into a squalid exile in neighboring Bangladesh. Aung San Suu Kyi insisted that what foreign observers have called an organized, years-long campaign of atrocities against the Rohingya has been exaggerated and misconstrued. She did not even use the word "Rohingya," adhering to her government's stance that no such ethnic group exists. On November 11, 2019, a landmark lawsuit was filed by the West African nation Gambia on behalf of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation, a group of 57 Islamic countries, accusing Myanmar of genocide. The Gambia's case relies on testimony from numerous witnesses and human rights experts, along with reporting from a U.N. fact-finding mission on Myanmar. (Sources: [New York Times](#) [1], [Guardian](#) [2])

On September 20, 2019, an alliance of ethnic armed groups—called the Brotherhood Alliance—that has been fighting the Myanmar military in the northeast and west of the country extended its unilateral ceasefire until the end of this year. The alliance comprises the Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA), the Ta'ang National Liberation Army (TNLA), and the Arakan Army (AA). The move came one day ahead of the expiration of the Myanmar military's own truce on September 21. The groups said the extension is aimed at facilitating the negotiation of bilateral ceasefire agreements and reducing the fighting. "Our triple Brotherhood Alliance is ready to enforce a joint ceasefire if the Myanmar Tatmadaw is willing," the statement reads. According to their announcement, the alliance's unilateral ceasefire extension is effective until December 31, 2019. The alliance announced the initial September 9 to October 8 ceasefire a week prior to their statement. The MNDAA, TNLA, and AA have troops operating in northern Shan State, and the AA also operates in Rakhine State. Clashes have occurred in Rakhine State since the AA first gained a foothold there in 2015, and began to intensify in November of last year. (Source: [The Irrawaddy](#) [3])

Clashes have occurred regularly across northern Shan State since then, resulting in combatant deaths on both sides as well as civilian fatalities. The alliance said it mounted the attacks in response to military aggression in both Rakhine and northern Shan States. The attacks reflect longstanding tension over the status of Brotherhood Alliance members within Myanmar's national peace process. Only signatories to the nationwide ceasefire agreement introduced in 2015 can take part in political negotiations with the government aimed at ending Myanmar's civil conflicts. For most of the past five years, the Myanmar military (and, to a lesser extent, the civilian government) have excluded the three groups from this process, by setting stringent preconditions for talks toward signing the nationwide ceasefire. More recently, the military and government have shifted their position, opening negotiations with each group aimed at individual bilateral ceasefires. Myanmar has also adopted this approach with a fourth ethnic armed group that does not have an existing bilateral ceasefire, the Kachin Independence Organization. (Source: [Crisis Group](#) [4])

### **Overview**

Since its independence from Britain in 1948, Myanmar—also known as Burma—has been embroiled in what some analysts call the world's longest-running civil war. On one side of the conflict, the Myanmar government seeks the domination by ethnic Burman—constituting 60 to 70 percent of the population—over the country's social, political, and economic realms. Opposing the government are dozens of minority ethnic groups fighting for increased representation or autonomy—most notably the Chin, Kachin, Karenni, Karen, Mon, Rakhine, Rohingya, Shan, and Wa. Since 1948, the Burmese military, which came to power in a 1962 coup, has subjected members of these ethnic groups to forced labor, torture, rape, arbitrary arrest, and extra-judicial killings. Today, there are at least 18 ethnic minority insurgent groups operating against the ruling junta. Myanmar has also experienced large-scale attacks perpetrated by the Vigorous Burmese Student Warriors (VBSW)—a student-led insurgent group not connected to any specific ethnicity—as well as by North Korean agents, who in 1983 attempted to assassinate then-South Korean President Chun Doo-hwan in Yangon, (then Rangoon). The junta changed the country's name from Burma to Myanmar—and the capital's name from Rangoon to Yangon—in 1989, and in 2005 relocated the capital to Naypyidaw. (Sources: [CNN](#) [5], [Foreign Policy](#) [6], [Conflict Map](#) [7], [ISS Risk](#) [8], [Guardian](#) [9])

Nearly seven decades of civil war have led to severe economic issues, refugee crises, and environmental degradation in Myanmar. The conflict has been fueled in part by the narcotics trade, and Myanmar is believed to be the world's second-

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largest heroin producer after Afghanistan. Ethnic militias are largely responsible for the drug's production. The Ta'ang National Liberation Army (TNLA), for example—which fights for the self-determination of the ethnic Ta'ang people—is believed to run methamphetamine laboratories and heroine refineries in the north of the country. Indeed, Myanmar's ethnic minority insurgent groups operate more as guerilla movements than terrorist organizations, and are not believed to hold extremist religious ideologies. The two most powerful groups—the United Wa State Army (UNWSA) and the Kachin Independence Army (KIA)—subscribe to Animism and Christianity, respectively. However, these groups fight not for their religions, but for the increased visibility and autonomy of their respective ethnic groups. (Sources: [VICE](#) [10], [ISS Risk](#) [8], [Ethnic Groups in Burma](#), [Martin Smith](#) [11], [Encyclopaedia Britannica](#) [12])

Similarly, the ethnic Rohingya Muslims in Myanmar's western Rakhine State have long sought increased rights and sovereignty. Myanmar's government, however, does not recognize the Rohingya as a distinct ethnic group, claiming that they are merely migrants from Bangladesh. The government has severely persecuted the Rohingya for decades, including by denying them citizenship and by limiting their rights to education, marriage, employment, and freedom of movement. The country's armed forces have also carried out military offensives against Rohingya—all amounting to what Human Rights Watch has deemed ethnic cleansing. Ongoing clashes between Rohingya and Buddhist extremists have also fueled the conflict in Rakhine State. In response, segments of the Rohingya population have formed insurgent groups, such as the Rohingya Solidarity Organization (RSO) in the 1980s, and more recently, the Aqa Mul Mujahidin, which the government held responsible for two large-scale attacks against Burmese officials in mid-October 2016. Meanwhile, international terrorist organizations including [al-Qaeda](#) [13], [ISIS](#) [14], the [Taliban](#) [15], and [al-Shabab](#) [16] have sought to radicalize and even recruit disillusioned Rohingya, though there is little evidence of domestic support for those terrorist groups. (Sources: [Human Rights Watch](#) [17], [Defining Myanmar's "Rohingya Problem," Benjamin Zawacki](#) [18], [Radio Free Asia](#) [19], [Diplomat](#) [20], [Myanmar President Office \(via Facebook\)](#) [21], [Long War Journal](#) [22], [Telegraph](#) [23], [ISS Risk](#) [8], [Agence France-Presse](#) [24])

Violence between other, non-Rohingya Muslim minorities and Buddhist extremists has also occurred within Myanmar. Much of this religious violence—in addition to Rohingya-Buddhist violence—can be traced to Myanmar's most prominent anti-Muslim Buddhist group, the "969 movement." The movement's leader, Buddhist monk Ashin Wirathu, has regularly called on Myanmar's Buddhists to boycott Muslim businesses, and has warned that Myanmar's Muslims want to "take over our country and make it an evil Islamic nation." Wirathu previously served a nearly decade-long prison sentence for fomenting religious conflict, though he was released in 2012. (Sources: [969movement.org](#) [25], [Public Radio International](#) [26], [Atlantic](#) [27], [Reuters](#) [28])

Myanmar's government has intensified its counter-extremism efforts in recent years. In June 2014, it enacted its first counterterrorism legislation, criminalizing terrorism and terrorist financing. Since the inauguration of democratic president Htin Kyaw in March 2016, Myanmar's ruling National League for Democracy (NLD)—led by Burmese stateswoman Aung San Suu Kyi—has signaled its intention to bring an end the country's civil war. That August, Suu Kyi launched high-level talks between government officials and representatives from 17 different ethnic minority groups, though no deal was reached. (Sources: [RFA](#) [29], [U.S. Department of State](#) [30], [Voice of America](#) [31], [New York Times](#) [32], [Foreign Policy](#) [6])

Myanmar partakes in regional information-sharing regarding terrorist attacks and trends, and its officials have undergone counterterrorism training courses led by INTERPOL in neighboring countries. Though the Myanmar government in Naypyidaw does not participate in the U.S.-led coalition against ISIS, it expressed condemnation of the terror group in September 2014 when the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN)—of which Myanmar is a member—officially condemned ISIS. According to a 2014 [poll](#) [33] released by the Washington D.C.-based International Republican Institute, 58 percent of Myanmar's population considers terrorism to be a "very serious" problem. (Sources: [Interpol](#) [34], [Myanmar Times](#) [35], [Global Coalition](#) [36], [Eagle News](#) [37], [International Republican Institute](#) [33])

### **Radicalization and Foreign Fighters**

#### *Myanmar's Rohingya: Persecution and Radicalization*

The ethnic Rohingya people comprise one of several Muslim minority groups in Myanmar. Numbering approximately 1.1 million and located in the north of Rakhine State, the Rohingya have long suffered suppression and persecution by both the

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Myanmar government and extremist Buddhists. While Naypyidaw officially recognizes several of the country's Muslim minority groups, the Myanmar government refuses to recognize the Rohingya as a distinct group—claiming that the Rohingya ethnicity was invented by Bangladeshi nationals seeking land in Rakhine State. Officials often refer to Rohingya as “Bengali,” “Muslim Bengalis,” and even by the pejorative “*kalar*,” meaning “dark.” In 2009, Myanmar's senior official in Hong Kong [described](#) [38] the Rohingya as “ugly ogres.” (Sources: [Council on Foreign Relations](#) [39], [Human Rights Watch](#) [40], [Human Rights Watch](#) [17], [Agence France-Presse](#) [38], [Myanmar Ministry of Foreign Affairs](#) [41])

Since Myanmar's independence from Britain in 1948, the government has placed severe restrictions on Rohingya's rights to education, marriage, employment, and freedom of movement. In 1982, the government passed the Citizenship Law, effectively denying Rohingya the right to citizenship. (Sources: [Council on Foreign Relations](#) [39], [Human Rights Watch](#) [40], [Human Rights Watch](#) [17])

According to analysts, the state's pervasive persecution of Rohingya may empower extreme Buddhists to wage violence against the Muslim minority. Benjamin Zawacki, the Senior Legal Advisor for Southeast Asia at the International Commission of Jurists, has [said](#) [18] that the government's “systemic discrimination” of Rohingya Muslims makes “direct violence against the Rohingya [by Buddhist extremists] far more possible and likely than it would be otherwise.” Extremist Buddhists have formed groups such as the “969 movement,” which plays a central role in inciting acts of violence against Rohingya and other Muslim minority groups throughout Myanmar. (Sources: [Defining Myanmar's “Rohingya Problem,” Benjamin Zawacki](#) [18], [TIME](#) [42], [Atlantic](#) [27])

The conflict between Rohingya and Buddhists in Rakhine State can be traced back to World War II. In 1942, the Rohingya remained loyal to the colonial British rulers, whereas the Buddhists supported the invading Japanese forces. In the months following Japanese invasion, Buddhist gangs drove thousands of Rohingya—who had benefited from British colonial rule—from their homes in the south of Rakhine State, (then called Arakan State). This spurred attacks by Rohingya gangs on Buddhist towns in the north. The region remained under Japanese control until a British offensive drove the Japanese out in 1945. (Sources: [Human Rights Watch](#) [40], [Human Rights Watch](#) [43], [The Rohingya and national identities in Burma, Carlos Sardiña Galache](#) [44], [Muslims of Burma, Moshe Yegar, p. 96](#) [45])

In April 1948, the Burmese government returned land in northern Arakan to Buddhists who had been previously displaced by Rohingya. Rohingya gangs boycotted the returning villagers and cut off their water and food supplies, prompting intensified clashes. This led to what came to be known as the Mujahid's Rebellion, in which groups of Rohingya “Mujahids” (holy warriors), reportedly incited “jihad” against the Arakanese Buddhists, and even against those Rohingya that did not support their cause. Some Mujahids further sought the annexation of northern Arakan by East Pakistan (present-day Bangladesh). However, the rebellion failed to garner significant public support among the Rohingya, and some Rohingya leaders even asked the Burmese government for weapons with which to fight the Mujahids. The Mujahids were weakened by sustained military campaigns throughout the 1950s, and they officially surrendered to the Burmese army in 1961. (Sources: [Human Rights Watch](#) [40], [The Rohingya and national identities in Burma, Carlos Sardiña Galache](#) [44], [Muslims of Burma, Moshe Yegar, p. 96](#) [45]; [Ethnic Groups of South Asia and the Pacific, James Minahan](#) [46], [Perilous Plight: Burma's Rohingya Take to the Seas, David Mathieson](#) [47])

The military seized power in a 1962 coup and further tightened restrictions on the Rohingya. In 1977, the junta launched the heavy-handed “Dragon King” operation in which they sought to register citizens and screen out foreigners. As part of the operation, Burmese forces burned, killed, and raped Rohingya civilians throughout northern Arakan in an attempt to drive them from the country. By May 1978, more than 200,000 Rohingya had fled across the border into Bangladesh, and militant groups emerged among the refugees. In succeeding decades, the military carried out intensified offensives against the Rohingya—most notably in 1991-1992, 2001, and 2009. (Sources: [U.S. Department of Homeland Security](#) [48], [Muslims of Burma, Moshe Yegar, p. 96, 101](#) [45], [Human Rights Watch](#) [40], [Human Rights Watch](#) [43], [Council on Foreign Relations](#) [39], [Human Rights Watch](#) [40], [Defining Myanmar's “Rohingya Problem,” Benjamin Zawacki](#) [18], [TIME](#) [42])

In June and October of 2012, Buddhist extremists and Rohingya Muslims clashed in Rakhine State, with Buddhist groups calling for the targeting of Rohingya and their sympathizers. The clashes led to the death of approximately 150 people, most of them Rohingya. An additional 100,000 people were displaced. In November 2012, Buddhist groups attempted to prevent doctors and aid workers from delivering medical assistance to camps of Rohingya. The government soon conceded that the violence against the Rohingya population had been organized rather than spontaneous. (Sources: [Myanmar Ministry of Foreign Affairs](#) [41], [BBC News](#) [49], [Defining Myanmar's “Rohingya Problem,” Benjamin Zawacki](#) [18])

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In recent years, and especially in 2015, waves of Rohingya have died on rickety boats en route to Thailand after attempting to flee squalid conditions at refugee camps along the Bangladesh-Myanmar border. These deaths have renewed international outrage at the oppression of the Rohingya minority. In response, in August 2016, Aung San Suu Kyi appointed former United Nations chief Kofi Annan to head the [Advisory Commission on Rakhine State](#) [50], which, according to its own website, “aims to propose concrete measures for improving the welfare of all people in Rakhine state.” Since then, international officials have issued mixed statements regarding the Rohingya’s plight. In November 2016, United Nations official John McKissick told the BBC that Burmese authorities were pursuing the “ethnic cleansing” of Rohingya, warning that that Burmese security forces had been “killing men, shooting them, slaughtering children, raping women, burning and looting houses, [and] forcing these people to cross the river [into Bangladesh].” That December, Malaysian Prime Minister Najib Razak told a rally in Kuala Lumpur that the “genocide” of Rohingya was the “world’s [problem].” Three days later, Kofi Annan told the BBC that he would not describe violence being committed against Rohingya as “genocide.” (Sources: [Economist](#) [51], [Rakhine Commission](#) [50], [Guardian](#) [52], [BBC News](#) [53])

Rohingya nationalists have formed several radical militant groups including the Rohingya Solidarity Organization (RSO) in the 1980s, and more recently, the Aqa Mul Mujahidin that—according to Myanmar authorities—carried out two prominent attacks in Rakhine in mid-October 2016. Meanwhile, international jihadist groups such as al-Qaeda, the Taliban, al-Shabab, and ISIS have trumpeted the persecution of Rohingya in their propaganda and have called on Rohingya and other Muslim groups in Myanmar to take up arms against their government. ISIS in particular has issued online statements attempting to recruit Rohingya to its ranks. However, there is no evidence to suggest that Rohingya—or Burmese citizens in general—have traveled abroad to fight with extremist groups. (Sources: [Asia Times](#) [54], [Wall Street Journal](#) [55], [Newsweek](#) [56])

### *Rohingya Solidarity Organization (RSO)*

The now-defunct Rohingya Solidarity Organization (RSO) was a militant group that fought for Rohingya self-determination and autonomy in the 1980s and 1990s. It emerged in 1982 as a radical breakaway of the Rohingya Patriotic Front (RPF), a moderate Rohingya nationalist organization. Led by a doctor named Muhammad Yunus, the RSO adopted a militant religious ideology and operated predominantly from the town of Cox’s Bazar in Bangladesh, from where it carried out operations across the border against the Myanmar military. The RSO received material and ideological support from regional Islamist groups including Jamaat-e-Islami in Bangladesh and Pakistan, Hizb-e-Islami in Afghanistan, Hizb-ul-Mujahideen in Jammu and Kashmir, and the Islamic Youth Organization of Malaysia. (Sources: [Asia Times](#) [54], [RFA](#) [57], [Diplomat](#) [20], [Trac](#) [58], [International Crisis Group](#) [59])

In the early 1990s, the RSO is believed to have sent an unknown number of Rohingya to fight alongside the Taliban in Afghanistan. In addition, according to a field report by Swedish journalist Bertil Lintner, approximately 100 RSO insurgents underwent training in Afghanistan’s Khost Province with members of the Hizb-e-Islami Mujahideen Islamist group. The RSO is also believed to have had operational links to al-Qaeda. In August 2002, CNN obtained more than 60 videotapes from al-Qaeda’s archives—one of which was titled “Burma” and featured Muslim “allies” undergoing weapons training at RSO camps near Cox’s Bazar. (Sources: [Asia Times](#) [54], [The Irrawaddy](#) [60])

The RSO was decimated in a counteroffensive launched by Myanmar’s armed forces in the mid-late 1990s. In recent years, however, Myanmar’s government has held the RSO responsible for several attacks, including the killing of four police officers in Maungdaw Township, northern Rakhine State in May 2014. In mid-October 2016, the government blamed a string of attacks on a group called Aqa Mul Mujahidin and alleged that it had ties to the RSO. The government further claimed that the perpetrators of the attack had previously received training from the RSO in Bangladesh. (Sources: [Reuters](#) [61], [The Irrawaddy](#) [62], [RFA](#) [57], [Myanmar President Office \(via Facebook\)](#) [21])

### *Aqa Mul Mujahidin and Other Alleged Jihadist Groups*

The Aqa Mul Mujahidin is an alleged Rohingya jihadist group operating in Rakhine State. Its name first appeared in mid-October 2016 when the Myanmar government claimed the group was behind two major attacks in Maundaw Township. During the attacks—on October 9 and October 11, 2016—insurgents killed nine police officers and four soldiers, respectively. (Sources: [Reuters](#) [63], [Wall Street Journal](#) [55], [Myanmar President Office \(via Facebook\)](#) [21])

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According to Myanmar's government, Aqa Mul Mujahidin comprises 400 fighters and is led by a militant named Havistoohar who previously trained alongside the Taliban in Pakistan. Under Havistoohar, the government [alleges](#) [21] Aqa Mul Mujahidin "[runs] weapons training and self-defence training in remote locations in the hills and forests." The government also believes Havistoohar has received funding from organizations in the Middle East while living as a refugee in Bangladesh. (Source: [Myanmar President Office \(via Facebook\)](#) [21])

Between October 10 and October 27, 2016, Aqa Mul Mujahidin and three other Rohingya jihadist groups—Faith Movement of Arakan (FMA), Harakat al-Yaqin, and Kebangkitan Mujahid Rohingya—released a series of videos in which militants declared jihad on Myanmar. All videos appeared to feature the same militant, Abu Ammar Junooni. According to the Terrorism Research and Analysis Consortium, or Trac, there is "notable" overlap between the alleged jihadist groups, though their exact relation is "unclear." (Source: [Trac](#) [64])

Harakah al-Yaqin was reportedly founded in 2012 and is led by Rohingya émigrés in Mecca, Saudi Arabia. Its leader, Ata Ullah, was born in Pakistan to Rohingya migrants and moved to Mecca as a child. In Myanmar, analysts believe Harakah al-Yaqin comprises hundreds of recruits familiar with local guerilla tactics and is commanded by Rohingya jihadists with international training. The group is reported to enjoy considerable sympathy among the Rohingya population, despite Rohingya religious leaders' longtime condemnation of violence. (Sources: [Trac](#) [64], [International Crisis Group](#) [65], [Reuters](#) [66])

### ***Global Terrorist Groups: al-Qaeda, the Taliban, al-Shabab, and ISIS***

Global terrorist groups including ISIS, al-Qaeda, the Taliban, and al-Shabab have all referenced Myanmar in their respective propaganda material, though these groups are not believed to have any operational capacity inside the country.

In a September 2014 video, al-Qaeda leader [Ayman al-Zawahiri](#) [67] mentioned Myanmar when he announced the formation of the group's newest affiliate, [al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent \(AQIS\)](#) [68]. He said that the chapter would fight to unite the Indian Subcontinent—specifically Afghanistan, Pakistan, India, Myanmar, and Bangladesh—under an Islamic caliphate, and that Bangladesh and Myanmar were "once part of the lands of the Muslims, until the enemy occupied it and fragmented it and split it." However, the level of influence or recruiting capability AQIS has over Myanmar's Muslims is likely scant. Analyst Amir Rana of the Pakistan Institute for Peace Studies noted that even "in the past [al-Qaeda] had failed to attract Rohingya Muslims in Myanmar." In response to the formation of AQIS, the Burmese Muslim Association—Myanmar's largest Islamic advocacy organization—stated: "the Muslims in Burma will never accept any help from a terrorist organization, which is in principle a disgrace and morally repugnant." (Sources: [Long War Journal](#) [22], [Los Angeles Times](#) [69], [MEMRI](#) [70], [The Irrawaddy](#) [60])

Al-Qaeda's messaging to Myanmar's Muslims was followed by an official statement issued by the Somali-based al-Qaeda affiliate al-Shabab in May 2015. The statement urged Muslims in Bangladesh, Indonesia, Malaysia, and Thailand to "take the pivotal role in alleviating the suffering of the Muslims in Myanmar." It referred to Myanmar Buddhists as "savage," and instructed Muslims to "take matters into your own hands...and know that this is a religious obligation upon you for which you will be held fully accountable in front of Allah on the day of judgement." The next month, in June 2015, a spokesman for the Tehrik-e-Taliban (TTP) urged Rohingya to "take up the sword and kill in the path of God." The spokesman announced that the Taliban's assets were available to the Rohingya, saying, "Our [training] centers, our resources, training, people, everything is available to provide comfort to you." The TTP had previously released a statement in 2012 in reference to the Rohingya, in which it alleged it would "not only attack Burmese interests anywhere but also attack the Pakistani fellows of Burma one by one" if the Pakistani government did not cut relations with Naypyidaw. (Sources: [Telegraph](#) [23], [Australian Broadcasting Company](#) [71], [Independent](#) [72], [ISS Risk](#) [8])

Soon after the formation of the so-called caliphate in June 2014, ISIS's leader [Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi](#) [73] called on followers around the world to wage jihad against countries where violations were being committed against Muslims—specifically mentioning Myanmar. Starting in mid-2015, the international terror group posted messages online urging Rohingya to travel to Syria to partake in the fighting. There are no reports suggesting that Rohingya—or any Burmese—have traveled to join the fight. Malaysian-based ISIS sympathizers sent an assassination list to Malaysian police in August 2016 that included Aung San Suu Kyi's name, prompting Burmese forces to tighten security around the de-facto leader. (Sources: [BBC News](#) [74], [Newsweek](#) [56], [Agence France-Presse](#) [24])

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### *Extremist Buddhists and the 969 Movement*

Extremist Buddhists have incited violence against—and directly targeted—Muslims throughout Myanmar. Buddhist civilians unaffiliated with any specific organization or group wage much of this violence. However, the ideology of the “969 movement,” the most prominent extremist Buddhist group in Myanmar, is believed to fuel much of the unrest. (Sources: [Public Radio International](#) [26], [Atlantic](#) [27], [969movement.org](#) [25])

Founded in 1999, the 969 movement publicly eschews violence and describes itself as a “social movement to preserve the cultural traditions of Buddhism,” according to its website. It is led by a monk named Ashin Wirathu, who served time in prison between 2003 and 2012 for inciting religious conflict. Wirathu regularly warns that Burmese Muslims are plotting to take over the country, and that shopping at Muslim-owned stores will lead to the decline of Buddhism in the country. In a February 2013 speech, Wirathu instructed Buddhists: “If you buy from Muslim shops, your money doesn’t just stop there...It will eventually go towards destroying your race and religion.” Wirathu has also said that “once [Muslims] become overly populous, they will overwhelm us and take over our country and make it an evil Islamic nation.” Wirathu’s extremist and conspiratorial messaging is sold on DVDs and CDs throughout Myanmar. (Sources: [969movement.org](#) [25], [Public Radio International](#) [26], [Atlantic](#) [27])

The group’s ideology and Wirathu’s rhetoric, in particular, is believed to spur violence between Buddhists and Rohingya in Rakhine State, as well as violence between Buddhists and non-Rohingya Muslims throughout the country. In early 2013, for example, riots between Buddhists and non-Rohingya Muslims in the central Burmese town of Meiktila led to the death of 40 people. During those riots, Buddhist monks attacked the Mingalar Zayone Islamic Boarding School, reportedly killing 32 students and four teachers with machetes, metal pipes, chains, and stones. (Source: [Newshub](#) [75])

According to a Reuters report published in June 2013, the 969 movement has close ties to and receives support from Burmese officials serving in Aung San Suu Kyi’s political party, the National League for Democracy. Burmese politicians in general may be sympathetic to the movement’s cause. Myanmar’s minister of religious affairs Sann Sint, for example, told Reuters that Wirathu’s “sermons are about promoting love and understanding between religions,” and that it was “impossible” that the 969 leader had incited religious violence. (Source: [Reuters](#) [28])

### *Vigorous Burmese Student Warriors (VBSW)*

Founded in the late 1980s, the Vigorous Burmese Student Warriors (VBSW) was a student-led armed group opposed to the military junta. The group carried out the October 1999 attack on the Myanmar embassy in Bangkok, Thailand, in which twelve insurgents took approximately 90 people hostage—demanding that the Myanmar government free political prisoners, begin a dialogue with opposition groups, and convene a democratic parliament. The group soon withdrew their demands and the hostages were released. In April 2012, the government blamed the VBSW for a triple-bombing at the Yangon Water Festival that killed 10 people and injured 170 others. The VBSW did not claim responsibility, and the group is believed to be largely inactive. (Sources: [Reuters](#) [76], [SAGE](#) [77], [Myanmar Times](#) [78], [Myanmar2day](#) [79], [Myanmar Times](#) [80])

### *North Korean Terrorism*

North Korean agents carried out a largescale terrorist attack on Burmese soil in October 1983 in an attempt to assassinate then-South Korean President Chun Doo-hwan. On October 9, three North Korean agents detonated three bombs at the Martyr’s Mausoleum in Rangoon, (now Yangon), just before President Chun was to participate in a wreath-laying ceremony there. The blasts killed 21 people—including 17 high-ranking South Korean officials—and wounded 46 others. President Chun was left unharmed because his car was delayed in traffic. Burmese police apprehended the three agents in the following days. One agent was killed in a shoot-out, and the other two were arrested after failing to blow themselves up with hand grenades. (Sources: [New York Times](#) [81], [CIA](#) [82], [Yonhap News](#) [83])

### *Ta’ang National Liberation Army (TNLA)*

The Ta’ang National Liberation Army (TNLA) is the armed insurgent wing of the Palaung State Liberation Front (PSLF), a political organization who advocates for the self-determination of the Palaung people, an ethnic minority found in Burma’s

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Shan, China's Yunnan Province, and Northern Thailand. For decades, the TNLA, along with three other ethnic insurgent groups that comprise the Northern Alliance, have been engaged in vicious armed conflict with the government army, officially called the Tatmadaw. A 2017 report by Amnesty International estimates that nearly 100,000 people have been displaced by the conflict, and alleges that many actions carried out by the Tatmadaw constitute war crimes. (Source: [Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project](#) [84])

The TNLA is known for its opposition to opium poppy cultivation, destroying fields, heroin refineries, and meth labs whose profits are funding the same government-backed militias the TNLA are fighting. However, the TNLA for its part seems to be making money from various types of extortion. In July of 2017, more than 700 locals from the village of Kham Teng fled following alleged extortion of more than \$45,500 from villagers by the TNLA. (Source: [Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project](#) [84])

The TNLA benefitted from the military and logistical support of the Kachin Independence Army (KIA) and Shan State Army-North (SSA-N). Due to this support, the militant group rapidly grew into a force that today may number as many as 3,500 guerrillas. Armed with assault rifles and rocket propelled grenades—the TNLA say they pay for equipment with revenue from a few mines they control and with money sent home by Ta'ang living in China and Thailand. Additionally, the TNLA has a policy that requires every ethnic Ta'ang family to contribute one fighter. (Sources: [Vice](#) [85], [Time](#) [86])

### ***Arakan Army***

The Arakan Army (AA) is an ethnic armed organization in western Myanmar, founded in 2009 along with its political wing, the United League of Arakan (ULA). The group claims to be fighting for greater autonomy of the Rakhine Buddhist people. The arrests in Singapore unveil an important aspect of AA's capability: support from Rakhines both at home and overseas. The AA's clashes with the Tatmadaw have employed both traditional guerilla and terrorist tactics. The AA has a Rakhine nationalist agenda that includes self-determination, safe-guarding Rakhine Buddhist identity and cultural heritage and the development of the state, one of the country's poorest. The AA espouses "the way of Rakhita," a rallying cry among Rakhine nationalists that evokes memories of the once powerful Arakan kingdom that was defeated by the Bamar Konbaung dynasty in 1784. (Source: [S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies](#) [87])

The AA currently has 7,000 to 10,000 cadres, with a significant portion being women. The group has a sleek presence on social media and a strong following among the Rakhine diaspora overseas. The AA's strength lies in alliances with other ethnic armed organizations, collectively known as the Northern Alliance that brings support in terms of arms, ammunitions, training and sanctuary. The alliance members also have a standing agreement to help each other when under attack. However, since January 2019, the AA has been fighting the Tatmadaw alone as other members seemed cautious about engaging in Rakhine state. (Source: [S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies](#) [87])

While a portion of the AA's funding is likely provided by their Rakhine supporters both within and beyond the country, Myanmar authorities have accused the AA of smuggling drugs to fund its army. The raw materials for drug manufacturing are sourced from China via the United Wa State Army (UWSA) controlled areas in Shan State. Reports mention that AA has managed to ensure a secure route for drug-smuggling by exploiting the corruption and inefficiency of Myanmar's law enforcement agencies. The AA uses heavy weapons, IEDs and landmines, with sources confirming that the group is currently receiving weapons from UWSA. (Source: [S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies](#) [87])

### ***Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA)***

The Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA) is an ethnic armed organization in the country's northeast. The group, led by Peng Jiasheng, claims the MNDAA is fighting an "anti-oppression and anti-dictatorship" war against the Myanmar military on behalf of the Kokang people in the country's northeast. The MNDAA has refused to disarm or actively participate in the 2017 peace process launched by the country's leader, Aung San Suu Kyi. The militancy maintains about 1,000 troops. Myanmar's Minister of Information, Ye Htut, alleged that Peng's forces are receiving arms, food, and medical aid from China. There are rumors of Chinese mercenaries entering Kokang to assist the MNDAA, however Beijing and Peng's officers deny this. (Sources: [Reuters](#) [88], [Daily Beast](#) [89], [Vice](#) [85])

Reuters reported that the MNDAA had raised more than \$500,000 over the past two years in donations funneled through some of China's biggest state and private financial firms after making a "crowdfunding" appeal on its website. While the

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predominantly ethnic Chinese group said it underwent a successful opium eradication campaign in 2002, the MNDAA is actively involved in the production and trade of methamphetamine, according to a United Nations anti-narcotics official. Its founder, Peng Jiasheng, has been identified by the U.S. Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA) as a major trafficker since 1975, according to U.S. diplomatic cables released by Wikileaks. (Source: [Reuters](#) [88])

The MNDAA was formerly part of the Communist Party of Burma, a powerful China-backed guerrilla force that battled the Myanmar government until splintering in 1989. The group is now part of the Northern Alliance coalition of rebels comprising one of Myanmar's most powerful militias, the Kachin Independence Army (KIA), and two smaller groups caught in a stand-off with the military since 2015 clashes in the region. (Source: [Reuters](#) [88])

### **Major Extremist and Terrorist Incidents**

Most of the violence in Myanmar is connected to clashes between the armed forces and minority ethnic groups. However, there have been a few notable, large-scale terrorist attacks that have received widespread media coverage and resulting international condemnation.

#### *October 2016 Maungdaw Border Attacks*

Rohingya insurgents killed nine police officers and four soldiers in Maungdaw Township, Rakhine State on October 9 and October 11, respectively—marking a dramatic uptick in violence in the region. The government quickly blamed the attacks on an alleged Rohingya insurgent group Aqa Mul Mujahidin, which it claims is connected to overseas jihadists. (Sources: [Myanmar President Office \(via Facebook\)](#) [21], [Reuters](#) [63], [Wall Street Journal](#) [55])

#### *April 2010 Yangon Water Festival Bombings*

On April 15, 2010, suspected VBSW insurgents detonated three bombs at the Yangon Water Festival in Yangon, formerly Rangoon. The blasts killed 10 people and injured 170 others. The government blamed the attacks on the VBSW, though the group did not claim responsibility. (Sources: [Myanmar Times](#) [78], [Myanmar2day](#) [79], [Myanmar Times](#) [80])

#### *October 1983 Rangoon Bombings*

On October 9, 1983, North Korean agents detonated three bombs in Rangoon in an attempt to assassinate then-South Korean President Chun Doo-hwan. The blasts killed 21 people—including 17 high-ranking South Korean officials—and wounded 46 others. President Chun, who was on an official state visit, was left unharmed because his car was delayed in traffic. Two days later, Burmese police caught the three North Korean agents, one of whom was killed in a shoot-out. The other two were arrested after failing to blow themselves up with hand grenades. (Sources: [New York Times](#) [81], [CIA](#) [82], [Yonhap News](#) [83])

- **November 12, 2016 - November 13, 2016:** Clashes erupt between Rohingya and Myanmar's security forces after approximately 500 Rohingya insurgents—armed with guns, knives, and spears—attack forces in Gwason, Rakhine State, killing two soldiers. The army retaliates by firing at the attackers from helicopters, reportedly killing more than 30 insurgents. On November 13, Human Rights Watch releases satellite photos taken in October and November that show the widespread burning of Rohingya villages. Sources: [New York Times](#) [90], [Guardian](#) [91], [Human Rights Watch](#) [92]
- **October 9, 2016 - October 11, 2016:** On October 9, Rohingya insurgents kill nine police officers in an attack on a border post in Maungdaw Township, Rakhine State. On October 11, insurgents kill four soldiers in the same area. Myanmar's government claims that a local group named Aqa Mul Mujahidin—allegedly supported by foreign jihadists—are behind the attacks. The attacks mark a dramatic escalation of conflict in Rakhine State. Sources: [Myanmar President Office \(via Facebook\)](#) [21], [Reuters](#) [63], [Wall Street Journal](#) [55]
- **May 17, 2014:** Suspected RSO insurgents kill four members of Myanmar's Border Guard Police in Maungdaw Township, northern Rakhine State. Sources: [Reuters](#) [61], [The Irrawaddy](#) [62]
- **February 1, 2013:** Riots in central Myanmar break out between local Muslims and Buddhists. The violence is largely incited by the ideology of the 969 movement, Myanmar's most prominent extremist Buddhist movement. Sources: [969movement.org](#) [25], [Public Radio International](#) [26], [Atlantic](#) [27]

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- **June 2012 - October 2012:** Buddhist extremists in Rakhine State call for the targeting of Rohingya Muslims and their sympathizers, leading to intense clashes between the two groups. Approximately 150 people die in the clashes—most of them Rohingya—and more than 100,000 are displaced. The government admits that the violence against the Rohingya was organized. Sources: [Myanmar Ministry of Foreign Affairs](#) [93], [BBC News](#) [49], [Defining Myanmar's "Rohingya Problem," Benjamin Zawacki](#) [18]
- **April 15, 2010:** Suspected VBSW insurgents detonate three bombs during the Yangon Water Festival in Yangon, formerly Rangoon, killing 10 people and injuring 170 others. The government holds the VBSW responsible, though the group does not claim responsibility. Sources: [Myanmar Times](#) [78], [Myanmar2day](#) [79], [Myanmar Times](#) [80]
- **April 15, 2010:** Suspected VBSW insurgents detonate three bombs during the Yangon Water Festival in Yangon, formerly Rangoon, killing 10 people and injuring 170 others. The government holds the VBSW responsible, though the group does not claim responsibility. Sources: [Myanmar Times](#) [78], [Myanmar2day](#) [79], [Myanmar Times](#) [80]
- **October 1, 1999:** Gunmen belonging to the VBSW take approximately 90 hostages at the Myanmar embassy in Bangkok, Thailand, demanding that Myanmar's government free political prisoners, begin a dialogue with opposition groups, and convene a democratic parliament. The attackers eventually back down from their original demands, and all hostages are freed. Sources: [Reuters](#) [76], [SAGE](#) [77]
- **October 9, 1983:** North Korean agents detonate three bombs in Rangoon, attempting to assassinate South Korean President Chun Doo-hwan, who is on an official state visit. The explosions kill 21 people and wound 46 others. President Chun is left unharmed due to his car's delay in traffic. In the following days, Burmese police apprehend three North Korean agents, one of whom dies in a shoot-out. The other two are arrested after failing to blow themselves up with hand grenades. Sources: [New York Times](#) [81], [CIA](#) [82], [Yonhan News](#) [83]

### **Domestic Counter-Extremism**

Since 1948, Myanmar's armed forces—or *Tatmadaw*, (literally, "the main army")—have carried out military offensives against various ethnic groups to prevent those groups from gaining autonomy. The *Tatmadaw* came to power under Gen Ne Win in a 1962 coup, and were widely accused of human rights abuses against minority ethnic groups in the following decades. Myanmar was led by four military-backed presidents until March 2016, when Htin Kyaw—an ally of the National League for Democracy (NLD) opposition party—was sworn in as president. Kyaw is a longtime confidant of Burmese stateswoman and NLD leader Aung San Suu Kyi, a Nobel Laureate who was placed under house arrest by the military for 15 years and was constitutionally barred from running for president. Suu Kyi is largely recognized as Myanmar's de-facto leader. (Sources: [BBC News](#) [94], [Washington Times](#) [95], [Ethnic Groups in Burma, Martin Smith](#) [11])

Aung San Suu Kyi's government has sought to bring an end to the country's civil war. In August 2016, the government commenced peace talks with delegates from 17 of Myanmar's ethnic minorities—though the Rohingya were not represented. Suu Kyi told the audience at the five-day conference, "If all those who play a part, however big or small, in the peace process cultivate the wisdom to reconcile differing views...we will surely be able to build the democratic federal union of our dreams." The talks ended the next month with no apparent breakthrough, though Suu Kyi expressed optimism. (Sources: [Voice of America](#) [31], [New York Times](#) [32], [Foreign Policy](#) [6], [International Business Times](#) [96])

Suu Kyi has been accused by human rights groups and international media of ignoring the persecution of the Rohingya population. In August 2016, Suu Kyi announced the formation of an independent commission—headed by former United Nations Secretary General Kofi Annan—that would propose strategies for bringing peace to Rakhine State. One month later, in September 2016, Suu Kyi conceded that her government was having "a lot of trouble trying to bring about the kind of harmony and understanding and tolerance that we wish for [between the government and the Rohingya]." (Sources: [CNN](#) [97], [CNBC](#) [98])

The government has made intermittent tactical efforts in the fight against extremism. Earlier in 2016, following terrorist attacks in neighboring Indonesia and Thailand, Myanmar's government posted counterterrorism forces in Nay Pyi Taw, Yangon, and Mandalay. CCTV cameras were also employed as a counterterrorism measure. (Sources: [Myanmar Times](#) [35], [Channel News Asia](#) [99])

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### *General Counterterrorism Legislation*

The government of Myanmar announced its intention to draft a counterterrorism law in October 2013. In June 2014, the government officially enacted its first official counterterrorism legislation, which criminalizes terrorism and terrorist financing. (Sources: [RFA](#) [29], [U.S. Department of State](#) [30])

### *Combatting Terrorist Financing*

Myanmar has worked to curb terrorist financing since at least 2002, when it enacted the [Control on Money-Laundering Law](#) [100]. In 2006, the government ratified the United Nations' [International Convention for the Suppression of the Financing of Terrorism](#) [101]. Naypyidaw toughened its stance against terrorist financing in April 2016, when Pol Colonel Kyaw Win Thein, deputy chief of Myanmar's Financial Intelligence Unit and head of its anti-financial crime division, told reporters that Myanmar "would like to cooperate more with INGOs and NGOs focusing on [the anti-money laundering and countering financing of terrorism act]." In June of that year, the Financial Action Task Force (FATF)—an intergovernmental body that sets international standards regarding anti-terrorist financing measures—removed Myanmar from its list of states deemed weak in the fight against terrorist financing. (Sources: [United Nations](#) [102], [Myanmar Times](#) [103])

Myanmar is also a member of the Asia-Pacific Group (APG), a regional body modeled after the FATF. The APG was founded in Bangkok in 1997 and comprises 41 member states. It seeks to implement the FATF's internationally accepted standards on anti-money laundering and anti-terrorist financing. (Sources: [FATF](#) [104], [APG](#) [105])

## **International Counter-Extremism**

### *Myanmar-U.S. Relations and Counterterrorism Cooperation*

Myanmar has limited diplomatic ties with the United States and other western governments. It has been the subject of U.S. [sanctions](#) [106] since 1997, due to its "large-scale repression of the democratic opposition," according to the U.S. Department of the Treasury. The United States has, however, delivered humanitarian aid—including through USAID missions—to the country's minority ethnic groups. It has also provided technical assistance to Myanmar's government on counterterrorism measures—though the extent of this assistance is unclear. The United States began to seek gradual re-engagement with Naypyidaw following the March 2016 inauguration of democratic president Htin Kyaw. (Sources: [U.S. Department of the Treasury](#) [106], [USIP](#) [107])

In an effort to tackle transnational crime and terrorism-related money transactions, the U.S. State Department has worked with a 24-member team of Myanmar law officers since 2018, including funding and training. (Source: [The Irrawaddy](#) [108])

### *Regional Cooperation, ASEAN, and INTERPOL*

Myanmar is believed to partake in information-sharing practices with regional governments regarding terrorist-related events and trends. In January 2016, following an ISIS attack in Jakarta, Indonesia, Myanmar's deputy home affairs minister Brigadier General Kyaw Zan Myint announced that Myanmar's counterterrorism officials were working closely with their counterparts in neighboring countries. (Source: [Myanmar Times](#) [35])

Myanmar is a member of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), a regional organization that promotes economic growth in Southeast Asian countries. Soon after September 11, 2001, ASEAN released a Declaration on Joint Action to Counter Terrorism, in which the member states vowed to "Deepen cooperation among our front-line law enforcement agencies in combatting terrorism and sharing 'best practices.'" In 2007, Myanmar signed the ASEAN Convention on Counter-Terrorism (ACCT), which laid a framework for greater regional cooperation in combating international terrorism. In 2013, all member states ratified the group's Convention on Counter-Terrorism, which seeks to prevent terrorist activities and deepen regional counterterrorism cooperation. More recently, in October 2015, ASEAN member states agreed to prioritize de-radicalization and rehabilitation programs for radicalized individuals. (Sources: [ASEAN](#) [109], [U.S. Department of State](#) [110], [ASEAN](#) [111], [U.S. Department of State](#) [112], [Benar News](#) [113])

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Myanmar officials have participated in INTERPOL-led counterterrorism trainings in the Philippines, Cambodia, and Laos. In addition, Naypyidaw is believed to share information with INTERPOL on terrorism-related matters. (Sources: [Interpol](#) [114], [Interpol](#) [115], [Interpol](#) [34], [Myanmar Times](#) [35])

### *Cooperation with the UNODC*

In late October 2016, directly following the Maungdaw border attacks perpetrated by the alleged Aqa Mul Mujahidin group, Myanmar adopted a counterterrorism training package that would be integrated into the Myanmar Police Force's training curriculum. The five training manuals were developed alongside the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), and seek to improve inter-agency cooperation. (Source: [UNODC](#) [116])

### *ISIS*

Myanmar does not participate in the U.S.-led coalition against ISIS. However, the government formally signaled its opposition to the terror group in September 2014 when ASEAN—of which Myanmar is a member—released a statement expressing concern at the rise of violence committed by extremist organizations, including ISIS. The statement noted that “these groups not only pose a threat to the people of Iraq and Syria, but also to all countries in Middle East, and if left unchecked, to the rest of the world.” (Sources: [Global Coalition](#) [36], [Eagle News](#) [37])

### **Public Opinion**

Public opinion regarding extremism and counter-extremism in Myanmar is difficult to gauge given the lack of polling in the country. However, a [survey](#) [33] conducted by the International Republican Institute between December 2013 and February 2014 found that 58 percent of Myanmar's population considers terrorism to be a “very serious” problem. According to the poll, 26 percent said that terrorism was a “somewhat serious” problem, while only nine percent said that terrorism was “not at all” a problem. (Source: [International Republican Institute](#) [33])