

# **The Rohingya crisis reframed:** **How the rise of the Arakan Army is changing the equation**

# The Rohingya crisis reframed: How the rise of the Arakan Army is changing the equation



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## INTRODUCTION

**F**ew humanitarian crises in recent history rival the plight of the Rohingya. For decades, this Muslim minority in Myanmar's western Rakhine State has faced discrimination, denial of citizenship and periodic mass expulsions.

The catastrophe reached a peak in 2017 when Myanmar's military, the Tatmadaw, unleashed "clearance operations" that drove more than 740,000 Rohingya into Bangladesh in what the UN has described as a "textbook example of ethnic cleansing".

Since then, the crisis has been locked in stalemate. Repatriation efforts led by Bangladesh, often with Chinese mediation, have failed. International condemnations and legal proceedings at the International Court of Justice have not changed the realities on the ground. And in the refugee camps in Cox's Bazar, now home to nearly a million Rohingya, despair and hopelessness have deepened.

But in recent years, a new player has fundamentally altered the political landscape: the Arakan Army. Originally a small insurgent group, it has grown into one of Myanmar's most powerful ethnic

armed organizations and now exercises control over large swaths of Rakhine State.

Unlike the Tatmadaw, it has signaled some openness to coexistence with the Rohingya, at least rhetorically<sup>2</sup>. This shift forces a reconsideration of the Rohingya question and creates both opportunities and risks for Bangladesh, the wider region and the international community.

This report examines how the rise of the Arakan Army changes the dynamics of the Rohingya crisis, and analyzes the implications for local governance, regional politics and international engagement.

## BACKGROUND: THE ROHINGYA CRISIS

The persecution of the Rohingya is rooted in Myanmar's nation-building project, which began to take shape in the late colonial era and in particular during the years immediately before independence in 1948<sup>3</sup>.

The 1947 Panglong Agreement between Aung San, widely regarded as the father of modern Myanmar, and the leaders of the Shan, Chin and Kachin peoples became a cornerstone of the early nation-building vision, promising a federal-style union and safeguards for ethnic minorities.

In the early years after independence,



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Rohingya in northern Arakan were generally treated, in law and practice, as one of the country's indigenous communities and as citizens under the Union framework, even if they were not explicitly named at Panglong<sup>4</sup>.

The 1962 military coup, and successive governments in the years that followed, increasingly denied their identity, however, and the 1982 Citizenship Law codified this exclusion, stripping most Rohingya of nationality and rendering them stateless<sup>5</sup>.

Violence against the Rohingya erupted in waves, most infamously in 1978, 1991-92 and 2012. Each time, tens of thousands fled to Bangladesh, only to be repatriated under fragile agreements that left the underlying issues unresolved.

The most catastrophic outbreak of violence came in 2017, following attacks by the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army against security posts. The Tatmadaw responded with scorched-earth campaigns: villages were torched, women raped and thousands killed. International investigators concluded these acts amounted to genocide<sup>6</sup>.

Now, nearly a million Rohingya live in Bangladesh, 600,000 remain in Rakhine under severe restrictions, and their homeland has been

**Arakan Army soldiers train for combat. Once a small and overlooked group, the AA has become a significant force in Myanmar's ongoing conflict.** AA Info Desk

transformed into a militarized zone.

Attempts at repatriation have failed repeatedly. In 2018 and 2019, bilateral deals brokered by China collapsed when Rohingya refugees refused to return without guarantees for their safety, citizenship and rights<sup>7</sup>. The intransigence of the Myanmar junta ensured that the crisis remained frozen — until now.

### **THE RISE OF THE ARAKAN ARMY**

The Arakan Army was founded in 2009 by a small group of Rakhine nationalists who trained initially in northern Myanmar alongside other insurgent groups. Its stated goal was to achieve "Arakanese self-determination." For years it waged a low-level insurgency but clashes with the Tatmadaw escalated dramatically beginning in 2018.

The group has proven to be militarily effective, deploying sophisticated tactics and earning strong support from the Rakhine Buddhist population, which resents decades of marginalization by Myanmar's central government<sup>8</sup>.

By 2023-24, the Arakan Army had consolidated its control over much of Rakhine, including 11 of 18 townships, and established parallel structures



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of governance. Its political wing, the United League of Arakan, runs courts, levies taxes, provides some social services and increasingly acts as a de facto state authority<sup>9</sup>.

Crucially, the Arakan Army has also started to engage in diplomacy. It has aligned itself loosely with the anti-junta National Unity Government, though it maintains autonomy. It has also cultivated links with China, which has strategic projects in Rakhine such as the Kyaukphyu Deep-Sea Port, and oil and gas pipelines<sup>10</sup>.

The Arakan Army's growing strength positions it as a central actor, not only in Rakhine but in the broader civil war in Myanmar.

### SHIFTING DYNAMICS FOR THE ROHINGYA

The fate of the Rohingya has long been tied to the hostility of the Tatmadaw. Under military rule, they have faced brutal campaigns, denial of identity, and confinement in camps and villages where their movement was restricted. The rise of the Arakan Army changes this equation.

Firstly, the group has expressed more pragmatic rhetoric, albeit occasionally conditional. Its leaders have stated that they do not view the Rohingya as enemies, and that repatriation from Bangladesh

**PREVIOUS:** Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi holds talks with former Bangladeshi counterpart A. K. Abdul Momen in Dhaka in 2022. **ABOVE:** Rohingya refugees scramble for aid in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh, the largest refugee camp in the world. AP/REUTERS

could be considered if handled under local authority<sup>11</sup>. This is a stark departure from the Tatmadaw's genocidal hostility.

Secondly, Arakan Army control in some areas has provided relative stability for the 600,000 Rohingya still in Rakhine, compared with the situation in Tatmadaw zones. Reports indicate that courts administered by the group sometimes adjudicate Rohingya grievances more fairly than junta mechanisms. Yet discrimination persists and restrictions on movement have not been fully lifted<sup>12</sup>.

Thirdly, the Arakan Army faces a political balancing act. Its core constituency, Rakhine Buddhists, harbor deep anti-Rohingya sentiment, stemming from a mix of historical violence, economic marginalization, demographic fears and hard-line ethnoreligious nationalism<sup>13</sup>. Too much overt support for Rohingya rights could alienate this base.

At the same time, the Arakan Army understands that international legitimacy, and potential support from Bangladesh and the West, depends on its treatment of the Rohingya. Therefore, its policy remains cautious and ambiguous: rhetorical openness and limited practical measures, but no firm commitments on citizenship.

Finally, the rise of the group potentially shifts the center of gravity



for negotiations. If the Arakan Army can consolidate its control, the junta would no longer be the sole interlocutor. Bangladesh and the international community might need to engage with the group as the de facto authority in Rakhine, creating new opportunities for dialogue about repatriation.

### **BANGLADESH'S POLICY DILEMMA**

Bangladesh has borne the brunt of the Rohingya crisis. It hosts nearly a million refugees in Cox's Bazar. The costs — humanitarian, social and economic — are immense. Dhaka has consistently sought repatriation as the only sustainable solution but its strategy has relied on negotiations with authorities in Naypyidaw, usually mediated by Beijing<sup>14</sup>. These efforts have failed.

The rise of the Arakan Army presents Bangladesh both with opportunities and dilemmas. On one hand, engaging with the group could open new channels for repatriation, particularly if it seeks to bolster its international legitimacy. On the other hand, such engagement risks antagonizing the junta and complicating relations with China, which remains a critical partner for Bangladesh.

Domestically, public patience in Bangladesh is wearing thin. Donor fatigue is evident, with a sharp decline in humanitarian funding<sup>15</sup>. Security concerns are also mounting as criminal networks and militant groups exploit the refugee

**ABOVE:** Makeshift tents at the Rohingya refugee camp where in March 2021 a massive fire destroyed thousands of shelters in Cox's Bazar. **NEXT:** Smoke and fire billow from Thantlang in Chin State, where in October 2021 more than 160 buildings have been destroyed by shelling from junta troops. REUTERS/AFP

camps where the Rohingya shelter<sup>16</sup>.

Dhaka urgently needs to make progress on repatriation efforts, but shifting its policy to engage the Arakan Army requires a delicate recalibration of diplomacy.

### **REGIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL DIMENSIONS**

The Rohingya crisis has always been enmeshed in regional geopolitics as key actors vie for influence, a dynamic that is now further complicated by the rise of the Arakan Army.

**China:** Beijing has vast strategic interests in Rakhine, including the Kyaukphyu port and the oil pipelines that connect the Indian Ocean with Yunnan. China has historically acted as a mediator between Bangladesh and Myanmar. It maintains ties with both the junta and the Arakan Army, hedging its bets. The rise of the latter could even enhance Beijing's leverage, as both sides seek its favor.

**India:** New Delhi views Rakhine through the lens of security and connectivity. Its Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Project runs through the state. India is wary of instability and cautious about engaging nonstate actors, but it cannot ignore the growing power of the Arakan Army.

**The Association of Southeast Asian Nations:** The regional ASEAN bloc has limited tools at its disposal. It has struggled



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to engage with the junta, let alone ethnic armed organizations. Yet, the association might need to adapt if the Arakan Army consolidates its authority in Rakhine.

**Western states:** The US, UK and EU have sanctioned the junta, supported international legal efforts that target it, and remain sympathetic to the Rohingya cause. The Arakan Army's stance on the Rohingya could determine whether it receives quiet diplomatic support from the West.

**Humanitarian groups:** UNHCR and nongovernmental organizations have long operated in Rakhine under restrictions imposed by the junta.

The growing role of the Arakan Army forces them to consider how to work under its authority, balancing access to populations in need with the risks of legitimizing a nonstate actor.

### **THE ROLE OF THE ORGANIZATION OF ISLAMIC COOPERATION AND THE MUSLIM WORLD**

The Organization of Islamic Cooperation and the wider Muslim world have long positioned themselves as defenders of the Rohingya, framing the crisis not only as a humanitarian disaster but also a religious and moral imperative<sup>17</sup>. Yet their actions have often fallen short of their rhetoric, reflecting the gap between symbolic solidarity and sustained policy engagement.

**PREVIOUS:** Military personnel participate in a parade on Armed Forces Day in Myanmar's capital, Naypyitaw. **ABOVE:** Myanmar police guard a UN convoy in Buthidaung after Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army attacks in 2017. REUTERS

### **Legal and diplomatic initiatives:**

The OIC has been instrumental in pushing forward international legal proceedings. In 2019, Gambia, backed by the organization, filed a case at the International Court of Justice accusing authorities in Myanmar of genocide. This remains one of the most significant steps taken by the Muslim world on behalf of the Rohingya, establishing an international legal mechanism to hold Myanmar accountable. The case has galvanized global awareness, though progress is slow and enforcement remains uncertain<sup>18</sup>.

**Humanitarian support:** OIC members, particularly the wealthy Gulf states, have provided humanitarian funding to support Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh. Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Qatar and Kuwait have pledged funds, though the flows of financial aid have been inconsistent and dwarfed by contributions from Western donors. Türkiye has adopted a more visible role, through both bilateral aid and more symbolic gestures such as visits to Cox's Bazar by Turkish leaders.

**Political dynamics:** Despite strong rhetorical support, many Muslim-majority states have balanced their positions on the Rohingya to protect their own economic and strategic ties with Myanmar<sup>19</sup>.

Malaysia and Indonesia have been vocal advocates within ASEAN forums, but even they have limited leverage.



Gulf states, preoccupied with other crises, have failed to apply consistent pressure on authorities in Naypyidaw.

**The Arakan Army factor:** With the Arakan Army now a dominant force in Rakhine, the OIC faces a new challenge: the recalibration of its approach to engage not only with the junta but also nonstate actors. So far, the organization has not articulated a clear stance on how to address the rise of the group or leverage it to advance Rohingya rights. There is the potential for the OIC to use its diplomatic weight to encourage the Arakan Army to adopt inclusive policies, tying political recognition and humanitarian support to guarantees for the Rohingya.

**Missed opportunities:** The Muslim world has not fully coordinated the application of its influence. Countries such as Malaysia, Indonesia, Turkiye and Qatar could form a coalition within the OIC to push for a more proactive stance, including engagement with Bangladesh and international partners to build momentum for repatriation. Without such coordination, there is a risk the OIC will remain a symbolic actor, unable to convert solidarity into substantive outcomes.

### FUTURE SCENARIOS

Several possible trajectories can be envisioned given the current, complex scenario.

The optimistic scenario is that the Arakan Army consolidates its control, adopts

**ABOVE:** Tun Myat Naing, commander-in-chief of the Arakan Army, attends a meeting of leaders of Myanmar's ethnic armed groups in Pansang, in northern Shan State.

**NEXT:** Rohingya refugees receive UN relief supplies at the Kutupalong refugee camp, where in 2017 nearly 430,000 refugees were herded there by the Bangladesh military. REUTERS/AFP

inclusive policies and begins working with Bangladesh and international organizations to enable gradual repatriation of the Rohingya under protective mechanisms. Citizenship issues remain unresolved but incremental improvements occur.

The pessimistic scenario is that the Arakan Army treats the Rohingya instrumentally, offering lip service to the push for inclusivity while maintaining de facto segregation.

Rakhine becomes more stable but the Rohingya remain excluded and repatriation never materializes.

The middle-ground scenario is that the Arakan Army governs Rakhine with relative autonomy, coexists uneasily with the Rohingya that remain there and allows limited returns under international pressure, but without rights or citizenship guarantees.

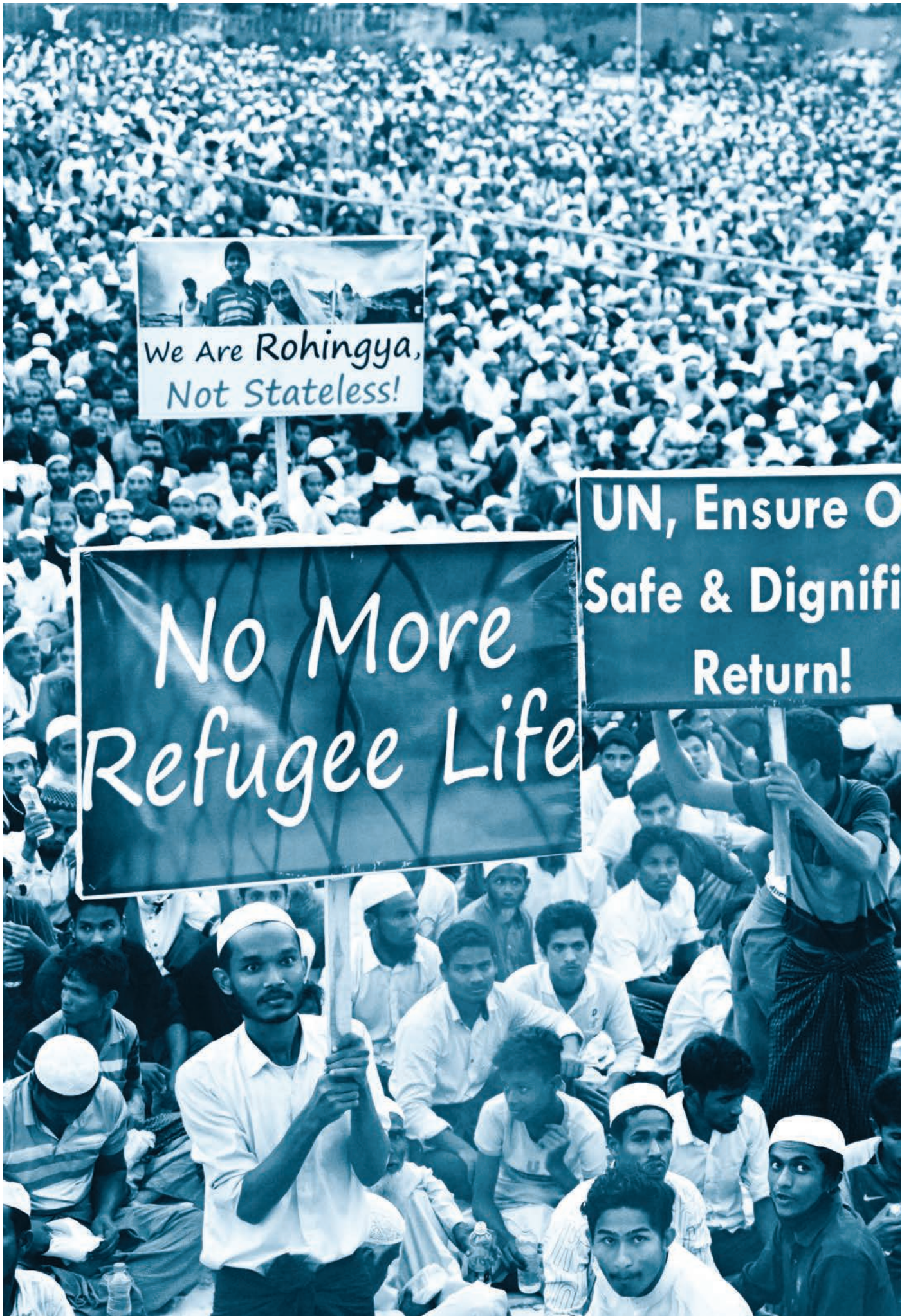
The crisis remains unresolved, though less violent than before.

### POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

#### For Bangladesh:

- Diversify diplomatic engagement to include the Arakan Army and the National Unity Government, not only the junta.
- Build a coalition with supportive states (the US, EU and Japan, for example) to encourage Arakan Army inclusivity.
- Develop contingency plans for protracted hosting of refugees, including the provision of education and livelihoods in camps.





We Are Rohingya,  
Not Stateless!

No More  
Refugee Life

UN, Ensure O  
Safe & Dignifi  
Return!



### For the international community:

- Tie humanitarian support and potential recognition of the Arakan Army to its treatment of the Rohingya.
- Support dialogue platforms that include Rohingya voices, the Arakan Army and the National Unity Government.
- Expand international monitoring in Rakhine to document the Arakan Army's governance and its impact on minorities.

### For the Association of Southeast Asian Nations:

- Adapt frameworks for engagement with ethnic armed organizations when they are de facto authorities.
- Encourage a regional consensus that repatriation requires inclusive local governance.

### For the Rohingya leadership:

- Unify fragmented representation to strengthen bargaining power.
- Engage proactively with the Arakan Army to seek protections and eventual recognition of Rohingya rights.

**PREVIOUS:** Rohingya refugees gather to listen to UN Secretary-General António Guterres during his visit to a camp in Ukhtia, Cox's Bazar, in 2025. He vowed to do "everything" to prevent food rations being cut amid donor fatigue. **ABOVE:** Aid, including food and medical supplies destined for Rohingya refugees, is sorted at Chittagong Port, Bangladesh. AFP/Getty Images

### CONCLUSION

The rise of the Arakan Army marks the most significant shift in Rakhine's political landscape since 2017. Its control over much of the state and its cautious openness toward the Rohingya create a new reality that cannot be ignored. The group's ascendancy creates both risks and opportunities for Bangladesh, the wider region and the international community.

The Arakan Army could through constructive engagement become a partner in facilitating safe and voluntary repatriation. If neglected, it could entrench a new status quo of exclusion, leaving the Rohingya in perpetual limbo.

The stakes are immense: the fate of nearly a million refugees, the stability of the Bay of Bengal region, and the credibility of international commitments to the prevention of genocide.

The Rohingya crisis has long seemed intractable. With the rise of the Arakan Army, the dynamics have changed. Whether this leads to progress or another dead end depends on choices made now by Dhaka, by international actors, and by the Arakan Army itself.

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