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**Track II in Myanmar**

**Introduction**

Ethnic conflict in Myanmar is complicated. Simultaneously it is about some combination of ethnic identity, religious identity, political autonomy, resource control/rent management, and national politics. The Burmese military, known as the Tatmadaw, have been fighting a civil war with at least one of the various ethnic groups since independence in 1948. There are various reasons for these conflicts, chief among them being the various groups’ desire for independence. The Rohingya are one of these groups that the Tatmadaw has fought against multiple times over the last 70 years. However, their situation in Myanmar is unique for two salient reasons. The most obvious of these is that they are a Muslim minority in a country that is 78% Buddhist and recognizes Buddhism as the State Religion. As suchthey are ostracized by both the national government and the other major ethnic group that shares their land, the Rakhine. The Rakhine have fought the Rohingya repeatedly as well as the Tatmadaw; in this case there is no spirit of “the enemy of my enemy is my friend.” The Rohingya also are the only ethnic minority group in the country to have laws written with the implicit goal of driving them out of the country. Their citizenship status, and recognition of being able to even live in Myanmar, is an issue on par with that of the Kurds and Palestinians and has directly led to violence.

In 2017 things changed and the Tatmadaw launched a military campaign against the Rohingya that quickly transitioned from counterinsurgency to genocide. Nearly 1 million Rohingya were driven from their homes in northern Rakhine State in western Myanmar to Bangladesh. In the two years since the start of the genocide, the Rohingya remain unable to return to their homes while they wait in refugee camps.

I started researching this issue a few weeks after it started for an undergraduate class on ethnic cleansing. I ended up turning that work into my senior thesis and used it to apply for graduate school, internships, and jobs. I spent the summer of 2019 at an internship with the U.S. Department of State’s Bureau of Conflict and Stabilization Operations working primarily on atrocity prevention in Burma, my prior research being one of the main reasons why I was offered that position. In this role I became intimately acquainted with the country and my passion for studying conflict in Myanmar was reignited. It is frustrating to watch the world repeatedly fail to solve this crisis if they even bother to acknowledge it at all. Myanmar is far away and most constituents of those leaders in a position to help do not care or even know what has happened.[[1]](#footnote-2) Even if the international community was able to agree on a solution, the overlapping ethnic and religious identities prevents identifying a clear set of cleavages between all of the local groups that would need to be involved to help permanently resolve the Rohingya crisis.

Based on Daw Aung San Suu Kyi’s statements before the International Court of Justice in The Hague on December 10, 2019, this crisis seems to have no possible outcome in which the Rohingya are allowed to return to their homes and allowed to live in peace. In these statements, she flatly denied the idea that genocide had been committed, and even suggested it was the fault of the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army for bringing the full force of the Tatmadaw on the Rohingya people.[[2]](#footnote-3) Famously stubborn, the Nobel Peace Prize winner known locally as “The Lady,” as she came to be known under the military dictatorship when the mere mention of her name was outlawed, rules Myanmar through a level of influence that is incomparable with any other figurehead in global politics today. She serves in an unelected position, State Counsellor, that was created specifically for her by the democratic government after the Constitution that moved the country from dictatorship to democracy outlawed her from running for office. Despite her unelected position, she represents the country on the international stage and her opinions are effectively gospel and the nation’s ruling party, the National League for Democracy, answers directly to her. The only real pushback she receives is when her opinions would require the Tatmadaw to cede some of its authority to the democratic government.

The 2008 Constitution enshrined the Tatmadaw’s role in the democratic political system Myanmar now has. The military is allocated a minimum of 25% of the seats in the national legislature, the *PyidaungsuHluttaw*, which gives them the ability to veto any changes to the constitution. In addition to the seats reserved for military appointment, they have an alliance with the main opposition party, the Union Solidarity and Development Party, which helps protect the Tatmadaw from NLD’s attempts to wrest power away from the military leaders. The Tatmadaw are also given the power to directly appoint the ministers for the Home Affairs, Defense, and Border Affairs ministries.[[3]](#footnote-4)

In the case of the Rohingya, both Aung San Suu Kyi and the Tatmadaw are in agreement that international actors have no place in settling what they describe as another chapter in “cycles of inter-communal violence going back to the 1940s.”[[4]](#footnote-5) With this clear aversion to Track I methods of solving this crisis, what are the other potential ways to solve this problem? Track II diplomacy could be the best hope for what seems like an intractable issue. Specifically, I think the ARIA model put forward by Jay Rothman in his book “Resolving Identity-Based Conflict in Nations, Organizations, and Communities” (1997) would be a good method to start with. This model is based on four steps Antagonism, Resonance, Invention, and Action. Antagonism is the first step in which both sides are able to present their understanding of the conflict/issue to the other side. Resonance is the second stage and when both sides have to move past their own understanding and attempt to see things from the other’s point of view. Invention is the third stage and requires both sides to come together to find ways of resolving the conflict, or at least ways to make strides towards addressing the conflict if a magic bullet solution is not available. Action is the final stage and is when these collaborative ideas are implemented. This entire process is overseen by neutral third party actors.[[5]](#footnote-6)

I can see the ARIA model being significantly successful in some ways, primarily in fostering some improvement in intercommunal relations between the Rakhine people and the Rohingya. This, by itself, would be an astonishing success. There is historical conflict between those two peoples going back decades and building a path towards peace would be fantastic if unlikely. But, as it seemingly always is in Myanmar, solving the Rohingya crisis is not as simple as stopping conflict between neighbors. By my count, there are about 3 ½ different levels of intervention that ARIA would have to succeed at before the most aspirational person could consider the Rohingya crisis “solved.” First is the conflict between the Rohingya and their Arakanese neighbors, as previously stated, this seems plausible and is the most similar point of comparison between Israelis and Palestinians. The second level would be between the Rohingya and the government, possibly including the Arakanese as a second and a half party that would be sitting next to, but not with, the Rohingya as they talk to the government. The third level would be between the Rohingya and the military, by my estimation this is the most likely level of intervention to fail as I will explain later. The last level is possibly the most important but I have only counted as half of a level because it cannot be rationally disaggregated from the other levels but still needs to be distinct for the purpose of the ARIA model, and that is between the Rohingya and the Buddhist community in Myanmar writ large.

The best way I can think to explain how this could, in a perfect outcome, work, will require that I start by addressing the religious cleavage between Rohingya Muslims and hardline Buddhists in Myanmar. The easiest way to explain this how significant this cleavage has become is with a monk named U Wirathu and Facebook. U Wirathu is possibly the second most famous Buddhist monk in the world after the Dalai Lama. He was on the cover of Time with the headline “The Face of Buddhist Terror.”[[6]](#footnote-7) He has the most important voice when it came to turning the Rohingya from a regular other to a “Fearsome Other.” Due to his influence, this religious cleavage has become extremely salient and other pockets of Muslim ethnic groups that are not the Rohingya, such as those that live in Mon State, have been targeted.[[7]](#footnote-8) His messages of hate, and similar messages from other sources, were spread through Facebook and had a significant impact on support for the ethnic cleansing in 2017.[[8]](#footnote-9) These messages of hate are what led to the important change when “fear of the other is transformed into the notion that the other is fearsome” (Das 1998, 125). Das’s argument is that for extreme violence to be made possible, there must be a shift in which the Other is made categorically fearsome. For Schissler, Walton, and Phyu PhyuThi (2017) the difference is subtle but important: the category of a “Fearsome Other” is what enables violence to be exacted on all those who can be placed within such a category. This categorical change marks the shift from a view that specific individuals within the Other are threatening to the view that all members of the Other are inherently a threat.

A goal of every Type II intervention between the Rohingya and every other group would have to be transitioning the Rohingya from a Fearsome Other back to the Other. The biggest difference between the Other and the Fearsome Other seems to be the transition from the emotion of contempt to that of hatred as put forward by Roger Petersen in his book “Western Intervention in the Balkans: The Strategic Use of Emotion in Conflict” (2011). Petersen describes contempt as

Petersen describes hate as a temporary emotion born out of an activated cultural schema that is triggered by events that fit the understanding of the dominant group where the action tendency is to “eliminate the presence of the group” entirely; something Wirathu has called for multiple times.[[9]](#footnote-10) Comparing these understandings of contempt and hate show how this transition from Other to Fearsome Other can be manufactured when those in positions of power are able to manipulate the emotions of their followers.[[10]](#footnote-11)

**Track II in Theory**

I would put the Rohingya somewhere between being held in contempt by some of the Burmese population and being hated by other segments. In the case of Buddhist nationalists, I would put the Rohingya as being hated by this group, if for no other reason than the Hatred is an extremely difficult emotion to interact with as a third party. In the case of the Rohingya, the schema of them being a) non-citizens b) Muslim and c) terrorists has been cultivated by hardline nationalists and the government over the years. One only has to look at how the government has allowed the systematic Othering of the Rohingya to be done in order to see this schema being reinforced in the last few decades. The trigger for this schema is any of the crimes committed, or presumed to be committed, by Rohingya individuals or the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA). In the past decade there are two major events that stand out as triggers. In 2012, a Buddhist woman was raped and three Rohingya men were accused and arrested. The incident sparked outrage and led a state of emergency being declared as mobs swept through villages committing brutal acts of violence.[[11]](#footnote-12) In 2017, ARSA killed 12 police officers in a coordinated attack on police outposts.[[12]](#footnote-13) This singular event, while not overly significant in a country with more than 70 years of continuous civil war, was the catalyst for what became the ethnic cleansing of the Rohingya by the Tatmadaw. These triggers have been used by activists, in this case the hardline Buddhist Nationalists, to turn contempt into hatred or to transform the Rohingya from the Other to the Fearsome Other.

I would argue that the Rakhine people hold the Rohingya in contempt but with the action of violence, and not avoidance, occurring primarily due to proximity between the two groups. I think this is different from the Buddhist nationalist group because the Rakhine are not nationalists, just Buddhists. There is no ethnic overlap between the Rakhine and the ethnic Bamar that the nationalists come from. But, as mentioned previously, this contempt briefly transitioned to hatred in the aftermath of the 2012 rape incident. Despite this temporary switch, the Rakhine seem largely preoccupied with their fight against the government in a way that prevents them from consistently activating the emotion of hatred against the Rohingya. Again, this is somewhat complicated due to the overlapping venn diagrams of ethnicity and religion. However complicated the Arakanese-Rohingya relationship is, it is possibly the most promising area for Track II diplomacy in the country.

**Track II in Practice**

So how do we address these emotions? Helpfully, for the case of instituting Track II diplomacy, contempt is something that, while it does not systematically decay, can be addressed by confronting grievances in a way that the antagonism/agonism aspect of the ARIA model works perfectly for. I think that an indirect approach to the Rohingya conflict through Track II is the way forward. The narrative around the Rohingya has long been that they are invaders brought by the British under colonialism, if they are even recognized as existing as an ethnic group at all.[[13]](#footnote-14) Possibly the single largest issue with the Rohingya’s status in the country is the denial of their citizenship rights via the 1982 Citizenship Law.[[14]](#footnote-15) It is due to this law that the Rohingya are not classified as Burmese citizens and are not afforded what nominal protections that brings. Centrist ethnic Bamars who have some connections with the ruling National League for Democracy Party, or even Aung San Suu Kyi, would be ideal people to be involved in Track II workshops about this issue. Legitimation of their existence and their rights as an ethnic group in Myanmar would likely have a net positive effect on conflict in the long term, certainly it would make it more difficult for structural violence and discrimination to remain embedded in the Burmese system.

Hatred is much more difficult because one would have to address the schema issue head on. Stuart Kaufman talks about how the schemas behind narratives that drive people to hate have some grounding in reality. This makes sense, as people we are much less likely to believe outlandish claims about someone if the claim does not overlap in any way with the stereotypes we understand to be true. The obvious counter to this issue then is showing the schema put forward by influential leaders like Wiratha is untrue or illogical.[[15]](#footnote-16) However, in this case, I do not see a way to do this. I say that not as a pessimist, but as an observer who can clearly see that ARSA have committed attacks against police and military forces, and Muslim men in Rakhine State have likely been guilty of committing violent crimes against Buddhists. Denying these facts would destroy any legitimacy a third party would have. One can disagree about the significance or threat to the social hierarchy in Myanmar that these incidents pose, but they are not claims supported by fabricated events. It is because of this that I see a temporary intractability in the identity conflict between hardline Buddhist nationalists and the Rohingya. If triggering events are what allow the temporary switch from contempt to hatred, then logically it will be temporal distance from these triggers that allows the hatred to subside and return to the manageable contempt. But there is no third party facilitator that can create this temporal separation required, it has to happen naturally, something that seems highly unlikely in this case.

I have not discussed the Rohingya-Tatmadaw relationship in terms of contempt and hatred for the reason that I do not think the Tatmadaw as an institution experiences these emotions in the same way. While the majority of the soldiers are Buddhist ethnic Bamars who feel the emotion of hatred when it is triggered, the Tatmadaw as an entity has another concern: resources. The Tatmadaw is effectively self-funded through corrupt businesses, something the United Nations Fact Finding Mission on Myanmar focused a whole report on in 2019. A significant amount of this funding is through more peaceful means that were made possible by the military dictatorship which ruled the country for 50 years. This is not true for all of the revenue opportunities as Christensen, Nguyen, and Sexten (2019) show by proving that the Tatmadaw use violence to control the areas around gem mines so that they can extract rents from the billion dollar industry.[[16]](#footnote-17)

I am highlighting this because it shows that the Tatmadaw are not acting simply on emotion or identity, though that does clearly play a significant role in who they target and when. Due to this difference in motivations for conflict, and the key fact that the Tatmadaw effectively operates without government oversight, Track II diplomacy becomes difficult. This difficulty does not yet take into account who would be the Track II actor from the Tatmadaw; is there anyone who could even fit this description? Even if a Track II actor was identified and an intervention was able to successfully address the identity aspect of the conflict, the Tatmadaw still has practical incentives to continue conflict in the area.

**Israel Comparison**

When comparing the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the Rohingya conflict, the clearest similarity is the power imbalance between the internationally recognized government and their enemy. Both the Israeli and Burmese militaries vastly outnumber and outspend their opponents. Both the Israeli and Burmese governments are considered the legitimate government of the region, even if in the case of Israel that becomes infinitely more complicated with the inclusion of the West Bank and Gaza. Both governments are also afforded the protections to exercise their Weberian rights to monopolize the legitimate use of violence within the State boundaries, again the complicated nature of land ownership in and around Israel being vastly oversimplified for the purpose of this discussion. Both governments have framed their use of violence as an effort of counterinsurgency/counterterrorism against “terrorist groups.” On the surface, this is hard to argue with as there are violent factions in both the Palestinian and Rohingya that have used violent means to attack state forces and/or civilians. Finally in both cases the issue with the use of violence seems to be the tactics used and the extent of the violence rather than the base act of waging conflict.

Despite this obvious point of comparison, class discussion has led me to believe that the Track II work relating to the citizenship and rights of Palestinians should be the focal point of practitioners that want to implement Track II in Myanmar. As practitioners look to the work having been done on this specific issue, it’s clear that progress will be slow. It is one thing for Track II actors to come together in workshops and come up with inventive solutions to long-standing problems that are codified, at least in part, in law. It is altogether another thing for those changes to be implemented.

**Conclusion**

I want to make it clear that I am not putting the presumed continuance of conflict in Myanmar on the failure of Track II methods or goals. As I have argued, Track II does have some chance of working in mitigating the emotion of contempt once it appears between groups that are interacting with the Rohingya. It also has some chance of moving the needle on the key issue of Rohingya citizenship. Any improvement relating to either of these would be a success. And progress could be measured by the amount of stimulus required before groups that hold the Rohingya in contempt transition that feeling to hatred. Despite these possible successes, I believe Track II diplomacy is likely going to fail in addressing the Rohingya conflict because it, by design, is not going to successfully address the causes other than identity that are also driving conflict. Those in power either do not have the political capital to spend on the issue or actually benefit personally from the Rohingya crisis remaining unaddressed.

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1. I can only speak in any depth in the American context here. Those who are aware and politically active find it difficult to lobby with the key policy makers in Washington. Largely this impasse has been due to the relationship these policy makers built with Aung San Suu Kyi during her years under house arrest. They equate her with the country and view American action against the country to be detrimental to her status, something they are unwilling to risk after years of equating her with a fight for democracy. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. Marlise Simons and Hannah Beech, “Aung San Suu Kyi Defends Myanmar Against Rohingya Genocide Accusations” (The New York Times, December 11, 2019), https://www.nytimes.com/2019/12/11/world/asia/aung-san-suu-kyi-rohingya-myanmar-genocide-hague.html) [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. Francis Wade, “Burma's Militarized Ministries,” Foreign Policy, November 15, 2015, https://foreignpolicy.com/2015/11/15/burmas-militarized-ministries/) [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. Marlise Simons and Hannah Beech, “Aung San Suu Kyi Defends Myanmar Against Rohingya Genocide Accusations” (The New York Times, December 11, 2019), https://www.nytimes.com/2019/12/11/world/asia/aung-san-suu-kyi-rohingya-myanmar-genocide-hague.html) [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. Jay Rothman, Resolving Identity-Based Conflict in Nations, Organizations, and Communities (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 1997)) [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
6. “TIME Magazine Cover: The Face of Buddhist Terror - July 1, 2013,” Time (Time Inc.), accessed December 15, 2019, http://content.time.com/time/covers/asia/0,16641,20130701,00.html) [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
7. Citation: Conversation with Kyaw Win of the Burma Human Rights Network, July 2019 [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
8. Paul Mozur, “A Genocide Incited on Facebook, With Posts From Myanmar's Military” (The New York Times, October 15, 2018), https://www.nytimes.com/2018/10/15/technology/myanmar-facebook-genocide.html) [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
9. Roger Dale Petersen, Western Intervention in the Balkans the Strategic Use of Emotion in Conflict (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011)) P. 43 [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
10. Ibid P. 44 [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
11. United Nations, “Myanmar Conflict Alert: Preventing Communal Bloodshed and Building Better Relations,” Refworld, accessed December 15, 2019, https://www.refworld.org/docid/4fd85cdd2.html) [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
12. “Myanmar: What Sparked Latest Violence in Rakhine?,” BBC News (BBC, September 19, 2017), https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-41082689) [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
13. Marlise Simons and Hannah Beech, “Aung San Suu Kyi Defends Myanmar Against Rohingya Genocide Accusations” (The New York Times, December 11, 2019), https://www.nytimes.com/2019/12/11/world/asia/aung-san-suu-kyi-rohingya-myanmar-genocide-hague.html) [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
14. Al Jazeera, “Who Are the Rohingya?” (Al Jazeera, April 18, 2018), https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2017/08/rohingya-muslims-170831065142812.html) [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
15. Roger Dale Petersen, Western Intervention in the Balkans the Strategic Use of Emotion in Conflict (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011)) P. 46 [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
16. Christensen, Darin, Mai Nguyen, and Renard Sexton. “Strategic Violence during Democratization: Evidence from Myanmar.” World Politics 71, no. 2 (2019): 332–66. doi:10.1017/S0043887118000308. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)