

Understanding & Responding to Conflict in Rakhine State

Conflict analysis & conflict sensitive strategic program advice for GraceWorks Myanmar, responding to the Rohingya–Rakhine–Burman conflict



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Methodology

This report draws on a large range of literature, plus data generated from a large number of formal interviews, informal discussions and field observations for the above projects. Part A is a summary of the more detailed conflict analysis presented in our book, which we highly recommend all to consult:

Ware, Anthony & Costas Laoutides, *Myanmar's 'Rohingya' Conflict* (Hurst, London & Oxford University Press, New York, 2018).

Anthony has visited Rakhine 12 times 2011-2017, Vicki has visited 8 times, and Costas has visited 4 times. Most visits were of 1-3 weeks' duration, with similar time in Yangon. Informants come from government, political parties, local NGOs/CSOs, activists, community leaders, local media, and (occasionally) the military. Formal interviews included extended discussion with prominent Muslim leaders in Yangon and around Sittwe, some identifying as 'Rohingya', plus ethnic Rakhine political party and civil society leaders. We have also conducted open community discussions in Rakhine villages, particularly in Kyauktaw and Mrauk-U, and in Muslim IDP camps, plus visited Muslim, Buddhist and Hindu villages in Maungdaw and Buthidaung. We have likewise conducted a large number of formal interviews and informal discussions with foreigners associated with humanitarian and human rights agencies in Rakhine State and Yangon. Vicki and Anthony speak some Burmese, but none of us speaks any Rakhine, Urdu or Bengali. Anthony and Vicki can also read and write Burmese. All interviews were conducted in English, or via an interpreter.

Note on Names

This report prefers the terminology 'Muslims of northern Rakhine' or similar to describe the people commonly identified as 'Rohingya'—unless 'Rohingya' is required for clarity. This former terminology has been adopted by the *Advisory Commission on Rakhine State* (headed by former UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan),¹ amongst others. Conflicts routinely attempt to control perceptions of identity, of oneself and 'the other'. Names are thus frequently contested, often quite vigorously. In particular, conflicts often seek to control any names that imply legitimacy to reside in or govern territory, or otherwise—thus conflict over names implies such legitimacy is a central conflict issue. Importantly, no right to self-identification is recognised in any human rights instrument, largely to avoid normative outcomes on complex questions like this. Inside Myanmar, the name 'Rohingya' is not perceived as an ethnic identification, but as a political gambit to claim group political rights by claiming indigeneity under Myanmar law. The alternative name widely adopted inside Myanmar, 'Bengali', implies they are recent migrants, legal or illegal, not indigenous and thus not eligible for group rights. As this debate is central to the conflict, adopting either name is both provocative and indicative of position taken on the underlying issue. This report does not presuppose either of these implications, and thus seeks to minimise use of either name.

This report aims for as balanced and neutral a position as possible, although we acknowledge neutrality is never completely possible. Our usage should not be misinterpreted as lending support to the government's position, who also advocate this terminology. We also note this terminology is semantically awkward, not entirely accurate as there are other Muslims in Rakhine State, and misleading insofar as it makes the primary identification religious belief—falsely implying this conflict is sectarian in nature. Nonetheless, it is our view that this compromise is the least offensive option, and most conducive towards long-term conflict transformation and peacebuilding, which is our sincere desire.

¹ Kofi Annan, Win Mra, Aye Lwin, Tha Hla Shwe, Mya Thida, Saw Khin Tint, Khin Maung Lay, Ghassan Salamé & Laetitia van den Assum, *Towards a Peaceful, Fair and Prosperous Future for the People of Rakhine: Final Report of the Advisory Commission on Rakhine State* (August 2017).

Executive Summary

Rakhine State presents a picture of huge untapped potential, largely unexplored because of tragic, long-running conflict that has resulted in deep multidimensional poverty. While rich in natural resources, the people struggle for daily survival in the midst of some of the deepest poverty in Myanmar, caused by a combination of decades of government marginalisation and neglect, and by intractable conflict with horrific episodic violence.

Conflict has simmered in Rakhine State for decades, if not centuries. Reignited in 2012 as communal violence, the effects have been amplified by episodes involving the Burmese military (*Tatmadaw*), the *Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army* (ARSA) and the *Arakan Army* (AA) since 2016. This conflict is a three-way struggle between the Muslims, ethnic Rakhine and Burmans for control of land, resources and political power, with all sides acting out of major grievances and deep existential fears.

Conflict violence and military operations in 2017 resulted in a massive refugee crisis, with 671,500 Muslims fleeing to Bangladesh in a matter of months, taking the total number of Muslims displaced from Rakhine to Bangladesh to almost 1.1 million. Tens of thousands of non-Muslims have also fled east and south. Notably though, an estimated 500,000 – 600,000 Muslims remain in Rakhine, some 200,000+ in villages in Northern Rakhine State, and another 200,000+ in villages in northern Central Rakhine State. *GraceWorks Myanmar (GWM)*'s flagship development program, *Community Development Education (CDE)*, operates in almost 60 ethnic Rakhine villages in northern Central Rakhine State, in areas in which Muslims remain, with potential to expand across the region. This places GWM in a strategic position to implement programs to bring both development and conflict transformation in areas where Muslims remain, as well as work to lay a foundation for a more prosperous and harmonious shared future should many of the Muslims return shortly from Bangladesh. Some 97% of the Muslims displaced from Rakhine to Bangladesh have expressed a desire to return to Myanmar when certain conditions are met, meaning there is likely to be a return of some scale or another in the years to come.

This is the target of this strategic advice—the areas inside Rakhine State where GWM operates, where Muslims and Rakhine still do live beside one another, or may again in the future, and need a peaceful and prosperous way forward. However, any consideration of effective and sustainable development in these areas will need to take serious account of the conflict, and must start with a detailed conflict analysis. This report therefore offers a detailed analysis of the causes and drivers of this conflict, followed by strategic programme advice, to provide context and make sense of the strategic advice we offer.

Firstly, we note that this conflict is deeply historical, an 'intractable conflict' with a long history and many unresolved grievances, driven largely by competing historical narratives. Most outsiders tend to largely ignore historical narratives, wanting to focus on the contemporary problems driving the conflict. However, the competing historical narratives are the way elite on all sides express the dominant grievances, fears and claims at the heart of the contemporary conflict, making conflict over history and narratives a fundamental driver of the contemporary conflict. We thus conclude that attempts to build lasting peace cannot ignore these contemporary expressions of history.

The most contentious and difficult historical issue, right at the heart of the conflict, is when the Muslims arrived in Rakhine State, hence whether they can be rightly seen as an 'ethnic national race'. Are they indigenous, with a centuries- or millennia-long history in Rakhine, or migrants from the colonial era or later? The importance of this question cannot be overstated. This conflict is primarily about the extent of political inclusion or exclusion of both the ethnic Rakhine and, particularly, the Muslims. For the Muslims in particular, being recognised as an 'ethnic national race' would grant both automatic citizenship and rights to seek semi-autonomous rule of northern Rakhine. Under the 2008 Constitution, any indigenous national races who constitute a majority in two or more adjacent townships may seek autonomous rule of those areas, an issue at the heart of the conflict. Otherwise, the Muslims must be considered migrants, who at most could only apply for citizenship as individuals, without the same rights.

This conflict is primarily an 'identity conflict', in which people are mobilised by simplistically categorising everyone into unidimensional ethnic identities. Everyone is told to see themselves as foremost a 'Rakhine Buddhist', or 'Rohingya Muslim', or 'Burman Buddhist'. This is expected to be the defining attribute of their identity, without room to acknowledge the multi-dimensional nature of human social identities. The

conflict is fuelled by a combination of chauvinism by the 'Burmans' and a fear of loss of sovereignty, the real loss of rights by the Muslims including being locked out of potential governance of territory, and Rakhine fears of loss of territory to the Muslims and assimilation by the Burmans. The Muslim *are* the most vulnerable and threatened minority. Despite this, the ethnic Rakhine likewise feel vulnerable and existentially threatened, by a Muslim population growing faster than they are, by the huge population of Muslims in Bangladesh to the west, as well as by the forces of Burman assimilation threatening to rob them of their identity and culture.

Interestingly, traditional Burmese notions of *lu-myo* (race) allowed for flexibility and movement between categories, based upon change of address, clothing, religion or other aspects. A central aspect of resolving this conflict will therefore be re-capturing this traditional notion of fluidity and choice, allowing Rakhine and Muslims alike to build ways of cooperation for mutual advancement, rather than being captured by the narrow and rigid ethnic identities propagated to sustain the conflict.

Economic interests are also an increasing factor in the conflict. Rakhine State has huge potential for economic growth. Rich arable land, an underdeveloped fishing industry, natural gas and deposits of minerals such as titanium and aluminium are yet to be fully exploited. There are thus many Rakhine, other domestic and foreign interests keen to capitalise on potentially vast profits. Furthermore, control of such vast resources also potentially shifts political control of an unstable and yet strategic location, bordering huge new markets and the Muslim territories to the west. While the conflict is not yet characterised by the plunder of these resources, there are growing concerns economic factors are becoming more significant, including that resources are being exploited with minimal benefit to local communities. Resources and economic interests have the potential to further fuel conflict and violence if benefits are not clearly seen to flow back to the people of Rakhine State.

There is an urgent need for major investment into Rakhine State, to alleviate deep poverty and provide the full range of services and infrastructure required to allow the residents of Rakhine to prosper. At the same time, development INGOs cannot ignore marginalisation that has been perpetrated against the Muslim population, and the macro political-economic factors driving both poverty and conflict in the state. However, these big-picture factors are largely beyond the influence of small INGOs, although GWM is in a position to work with Rakhine communities to begin the process of empowerment and social change, and instil new values towards the Muslims.

In the midst of the uncertainty and insecurity created by the transition to democracy, access to unregulated sources of poor quality information such as social media fuels hate speech, rumour, distrust and ultimately fear. With Muslim and Rakhine communities now almost completely segregated, the normal back channels of communication which would allow more moderate actors to attempt to de-escalate tensions have largely been lost, significantly increasing the risk of violent response to any provocation, including unfounded rumours on Facebook. The need for critical thinking and reestablishment of connections between the communities is urgent.

'*Conflict-sensitivity*' has become an umbrella term for a diversity of analytical frameworks and tools adopted by international agencies attempting to adapt development interventions to conflict-affected contexts. Each of these approaches involve using some form of conflict analysis to try to anticipate the interaction between development interventions and the context, leading to adaptations to programming to minimise the risks or negative effects, and maximise positive impacts from the programs.

GWM can mitigate risks associated with the CDE programme by taking care to address trauma and intra-communal violence, in the course of local empowerment, and develop empathy and critical thinking to ensure empowerment is critically aware and does not increase mobilisation towards violence. Judgmentalism and paternalism towards the Rakhine must be avoided, and appeal made to their ideal of being a peaceful people. GWM runs the opposite risk to most international agencies, of being accused of having a pro-Rakhine bias, of ignoring the human rights and needs of the Muslims, or of supporting and propagating a Rakhine nationalist agenda. Clear communication is required, together with significant promotion of empathy towards the Muslims and everyday peacebuilding from the Rakhine side is required to counter this. And the risk of increased intra-communal conflict due to improving the social power of women and the more marginalised must be managed, given the common link between intra-communal conflict as a precursor to most inter-communal conflict. CDE should address any perceived bias on their

operations, work against escalation of conflict tension at any level, and address the economic and social damage of conflict.

We identify several areas within which '*connectors*', '*bridges*', '*local capacities for peace*' or '*shared public culture*' between conflict groups reside, and thus areas of opportunity for GWM to build additional specific peacebuilding programming. These include: the common history and grievances shared by both Muslims and the Rakhine; the engagement between the communities, largely around agriculture, labour, markets and trade, a potential basis for expanded peaceful interaction; shared needs and values, particularly where working across both communities would maximise the benefit to both communities, such as in healthcare and education; and, the prospects of cultural exchange through arts and sports interaction.

Based on this analysis, this report then recommends in detail ten elements that could be adopted into potential development programming to address key conflict drivers, namely:

1. Provide impartial humanitarian aid to displaced communities
2. Counter Social media narratives
3. Train in critical thinking skills
4. Combat everyday intra-communal violence (particularly gender-based violence)
5. Facilitate re-imagination of identities
6. Stabilise local relations and establish everyday peace between communities
7. Expand everyday peace into positive inter-communal encounters and activities
8. Scale-up CDE as the basis for all the above practices
9. Re-connect leaders and facilitate more formalised dialogue
10. Facilitate critical engagement with history

Implementation of each of these is elaborated in detail in the latter part of the report.

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Preamble

International attention has largely focussed on the 'Rohingya' Muslim population, particularly their citizenship, rights and refugee crisis. These are all very significant issues, but not the primary focus of this report. *GraceWorks Myanmar's (GWM)* mandate, operational capacity and ongoing programming all focus on community development inside Myanmar, and their programs in Rakhine State since 2011 have been primarily in ethnic Rakhine villages in central Rakhine (Sittwe, Kyauktaw and Mrauk-U). This strategic advice, therefore, offers conflict analysis and responses directly relevant to this specific context and work.

PART A: Conflict Analysis

Most information in Part A is derived from the more detailed conflict analysis presented in our book:
Anthony Ware & Costas Laoutides, *Myanmar's 'Rohingya' Conflict* (Hurst & Oxford Uni Press, 2018)

Context

Rakhine State, the western-most part of Myanmar, runs about 450 km along the Bay of Bengal and shares a 256 km border with Bangladesh. Called Arakan until 1989, Rakhine is relatively isolated from central Myanmar by mountains that were nearly impassable before recent road construction. This means that historically the region was more closely connected with Bengal via maritime trade than with the Burmese kingdoms. Historians note that an 'Arakan-Bengal continuum'² of trade and cultural exchange existed prior to the 18th century, with a character quite distinct from the civilisations in either the Ganges or Irrawaddy River basins. Rakhine, referred to as the 'Western Gate' by many Burmese, has thus been at the Muslim-Buddhist interface for centuries—and negotiated this extremely well, it should be said, until at least the eighteenth century.

MAP 1: Rakhine State in relation to the Bay of Bengal (Ware & Laoutides 2018, with permission)



² Steven van Galen, *Arakan and Bengal: The rise and decline of the Mrauk U kingdom (Burma) from the fifteenth to the seventeenth century AD* (Doctoral Thesis, Universiteit Leiden, 2008).

Prior to the current refugee crisis, Rakhine State was home to approximately 3.2 to 3.4 million people.³ A little under 2 million were ethnic Rakhine, an estimated 1.1 to 1.4 million were Muslim 'Rohingya', and the remainder were Burman or from a diversity of very small minority groups including Chin, Mro, Daignet, Kaman and Hindu. Rakhine State is desperately poor and underdeveloped. This conflict is fuelled by acute civil, political and economic inequalities, both between the Muslim and Buddhist communities, and between each of these and the Burman ethnic majority. Muslims were not enumerated during the 2014 Census, which inadvertently gives us a clear snapshot of the standard of living of the ethnic Rakhine majority in particular, in contrast to national averages. Table 1 shows figures which can be taken as the standard of living of the ethnic Rakhine compared to the national average. This data paints a compelling picture.

TABLE 1: 2014 Census data contrasting Rakhine with the national average⁴

Measure	Rakhine	National	Notes
improved drinking water	37.8%	69.5%	lowest in country
improved sanitation	31.8%	74.3%	less than 1/2 average
electricity for lighting	12.8%	32.4%	about a 1/3 average
mobile phone access	15.8%	35.9%	less than 1/2 average
only thatch roofing	72.5%	35.1%	more than 2x average
cook with firewood	88.9%	69.2%	
no identity papers	37.7%	27.3%	

The World Bank used this 2014 Census data to create a *Wealth Ranking Index*, ranking all 330 townships in Myanmar.⁵ This index placed over half of Rakhine's 17 townships amongst the 20 most impoverished townships in the country. Significantly, Kyauktaw, Mrauk-U, Ponnagyun, Rathedaung, Minbya, Myebon and Pauktaw are all amongst the 20 poorest in the country—many being areas in which GWM has community development programs. See Map 2 for locations.

This data, of course, only really relates to those enumerated, almost all ethnic Rakhine. The restricted mobility and citizenship of the Muslims, together with poor service provision, means that the Muslims who still live in these townships are even more poor, marginal and vulnerable. Likewise, the Muslims in Maungdaw and Buthidaung were likely as poor (or poorer) than these other townships, although hard data does not exist and the recent crisis means very few Muslims remain in these townships.

The point is that the Census data clearly shows northern/central Rakhine has fallen significantly behind the rest of the country. It is not only the Muslims who have been mired in poverty, as many international reports highlight, but so has almost everyone living in central and northern Rakhine State, Muslim and non-Muslim. Given this region is also prone to extreme weather (cyclones and flooding), local competition between neighbouring poor communities over basic livelihoods, land and services, cannot be ignored when trying to understand the dynamics of this conflict.

³ This figure is the number of people listed as not enumerated in Rakhine in: Union of Myanmar, *The 2014 Myanmar Population and Housing Census: Rakhine State Report* (Census Report Volume 3–K, Ministry of Immigration and Population, 2015).

⁴ *ibid.*

⁵ World Bank, *Wealth Ranking World Bank* (Myanmar Information Management Unit, 2015, retrieved 8 March 2017, www.themimu.info/search/node/World%20Bank%20Wealth%20Ranking).

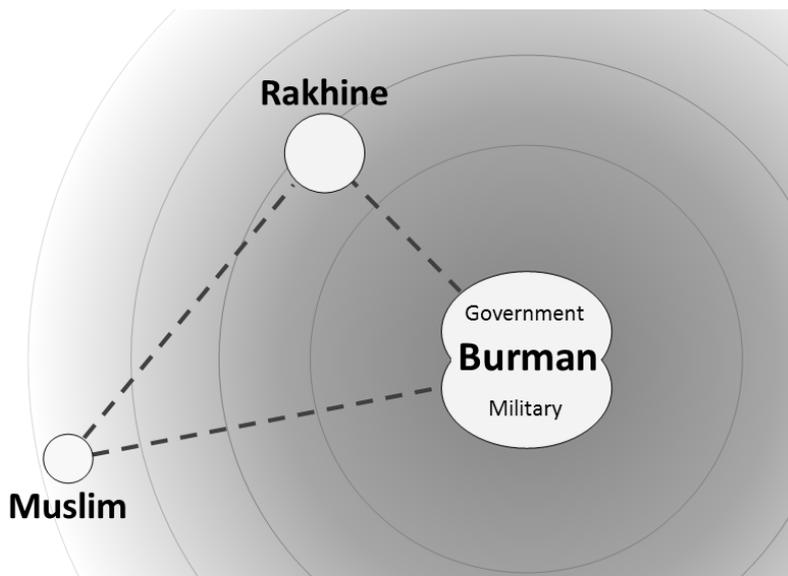
MAP 2: Townships in Rakhine State, Myanmar ©MIMU, used with permission



Recent violence, current situation

There has been very significant violence in Rakhine over the past 5 years or so, across a number of dimensions. While most attention has been on the military as the main perpetrators and the 'Rohingya' Muslims as the main victims, there has also been significant violence between the ethnic Rakhine and Muslim communities, between the ethnic Rakhine and the military or government, and perpetrated by some of the Muslims towards state security forces. The Muslims are certainly the most marginalised, powerless and victimised in all this, but the Rakhine also have their own conflict with the Burman-led military or government. This conflict, therefore, is multi-dimensional, primarily tripartite as illustrated in Figure 1 below.

FIGURE 1 The tripartite nature of conflict in Rakhine State, © Ware & Laoutides 2018



The following discussion explores the recent violence along each of these dimensions in some depth, to provide detailed context.

2012 communal violence⁶

Long-simmering communal tensions between the Rakhine and Muslim communities erupted into open violence in June 2012. This was the first serious outbreak of violence in the state in two decades, and the beginning of the current emergency situation. The proximal trigger was the brutal rape and murder of a Rakhine woman by Muslim men on 28 May 2012, in a rural village in Ramree. Significantly, this occurred in central Rakhine, where Muslims are in the minority. Local police quickly detained three Muslims suspects. That afternoon, a mob besieged the police station demanding they be handed over. The police rightly refused 'mob justice', and had to fire shots to disburse the crowd. Three days later, another mob attacked and killed 10 Muslims in nearby Toungup, igniting Muslim fears. Rumours and accusations swirled, until widespread violence erupted on 7 June. A Muslim crowd began throwing stones after Friday prayers in Maungdaw. Police fired shots to disperse the crowd, and several people were killed. The crowd scattered, but some angry Muslims set fire to the homes of local Rakhine villagers, who retaliated. Violence quickly snowballed, killing 98 people, with 5,338 homes destroyed and 75,000 people displaced.⁷

Security forces eventually brought the situation under control, with significant numbers of new troops and a 3-month curfew, plus a ban on all unauthorised meetings. However, as the end of the curfew approached with no official measures to address grievances, Buddhist nationalists began mobilising. Ashin Wirathu led

⁶ Most information in this section is derived from International Crisis Group [ICG] reports: *Myanmar Conflict Alert: Preventing Communal Bloodshed and Building Better Relations* (Alert Asia, 12 June 2012); *The Dark Side of Transition: Violence against Muslims in Myanmar* (Asia Report No.251, 1 October 2013); and *Myanmar: The Politics of Rakhine State*. (Asia Report No.261, 22 October 2014).

⁷ Union of Myanmar, *Final Report of Inquiry Commission on Sectarian Violence in Rakhine State* (Republic of the Union of Myanmar, 8 July 2013).

a march in Mandalay, to protest pro-Muslim international bias, which drew some 5,000 monks—the biggest protest in Myanmar since the 2007 *Saffron Revolution*. Then a meeting in Rathedaung, said to be the biggest public meeting in the state since Independence, laid out a radical manifesto which included armed local militia, the removal of all 'Bengali' villages, and the reclamation of land from the Muslims. And so on. It is thus hardly surprising that shortly after the state of emergency ended, a second wave of violence commenced on 21 October. This time, however, attacks appeared well planned and coordinated, targeting Muslims. Official figures put the combined toll at 192 dead, 265 injured, 8,614 homes destroyed, with almost 2,000 public buildings razed and 140,000 people displaced, in violence that raged across 11 of Rakhine's 17 townships.⁸ While 20,000 of the displaced were ethnic Rakhine and Kaman, 86 per cent of the houses destroyed and people displaced were 'Rohingya' Muslims.⁹ And most of the Muslims displaced, especially in central Rakhine, have remained largely confined to camps ever since, while Rakhine have returned home. Travel restrictions have become even more severe, with segregation so strict as to greatly restrict access by the Muslim community to the limited healthcare, education, markets and other services available in Rakhine.

Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA) 2016-2017 and related violence¹⁰

The Muslims of northern Rakhine State have never been a particularly violent or radicalised population,¹¹ despite decades of marginalisation. However, most Muslims in northern Rakhine State have been either confined to squalid IDP camps or restricted to their village tracts for decades, often under military curfew or heightened security presence, greatly affecting their livelihoods and well-being. This has been quite acute since 2012. A growing sense of despair has thus permeated the community, allowing a growing number to justify recourse to violence.

A new Muslim militant group, the *Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA)*, launched a first round of deadly attacks on 9 October 2016, against 3 police posts in Maungdaw and Rathedaung. They appear to have ambitiously (and naïvely) sought to capture the northwest of the state, and establish a liberated area similar to those controlled by some of the larger ethnic armed groups in Myanmar's north and east. Some 400 Muslims participated in these coordinated attacks, mostly armed with knives and slingshots. They seized 67 military-grade weapons and 10,930 rounds of ammunition, and used sophisticated tactics including an improvised explosive device (IED) and an ambush to delay reinforcements—tactics believed imported from the Middle East. Concerningly, immediately after the initial attack a series of videos was uploaded to social media calling for other 'Rohingya' to join a *jihad* to liberate northern Rakhine and appealing for foreign support, weapons and fighters. The main speaker in the videos, a Muslim from northern Rakhine, born in Karachi and who grew up in Mecca, disappeared from Saudi Arabia after the 2012 violence. He is believed to have spent time with the Pakistan Taliban, and attacks are believed to have been funded by a cadre of 'Rohingya' diaspora in Saudi Arabia.

These 2016 attacks were a major escalation in a conflict that had seen little organised Muslim resistance for two decades. Clashes with security forces over the following days, who fought to regain control, resulted in the deaths of at least 10 police and 7 soldiers. Given this violence was instigated in the wake of 2012 Muslim-Rakhine *communal* violence, it is significant these initial attacks only targeted security forces. They appear classic ethnic insurgency in scope, aim and implementation. ARSA did execute informants, Muslim and non-Muslim, and violence against civilians did spiral out of control a year later, but non-Muslim communities, leaders and institutions do not appear to have been targeted in pre-planned attacks. The main enemy, in the eye of the militants, thus appears to be the Burmese military and state.

⁸ *ibid.*

⁹ *Ibid.* Also UNOCHA, *Rakhine Response Plan (Myanmar) July 2012 - December 2013* (United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, Yangon, 2013).

¹⁰ Much of the information in this section is derived from the ICG reports *Myanmar: A New Muslim Insurgency in Rakhine State* (Asia Report No.283, 2016) & *Myanmar's Rohingya Crisis Enters a Dangerous New Phase*. (Asia Report No.292, 2017).

¹¹ See Andrew Selth, *Burma's Muslims: Terrorists or Terrorised?* (Strategic and Defence Studies Centre, ANU, 2003); 'Burma's Muslims and the War on Terror.' *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, Vol.27, Iss.2 (2004), pp.107-126, and 'Burma's Muslims: A primer', *The Interpreter* (Lowy Institute for International Policy, 27 March 2013). Also Moshe Yegar, *The Muslims of Burma: A study of a minority group* (Otta Harrassowitz, 1972) and *Between Integration and Secession: The Muslim Communities of the Southern Philippines, Southern Thailand, and Western Burma/Myanmar* (Lexington, 2002). Also Richard Horsey, 'Myanmar Border Attacks Fuel Tensions with Rohingya Muslim Minority' *Commentary Asia* (International Crisis Group, 12 October 2016).

The Burmese military had a responsibility to bring the situation under control. Their 'area clearance operations' against this first round of attacks, however, were excessively harsh, by any measure. Formal operations lasted 5 months, from 9 October 2016 until 9 February 2017, and were disproportionate in comparison with their responses to insurgent attacks elsewhere in the country. Most of international reports documenting human rights abuses released during the last two years relate to this period. Constitutionally, the military is not accountable to the government, and both they and the civilian government deny almost all allegations of excess. This, however, is very hard to believe, given the military's brutal history and the consistent testimony of those effected.

The heavy-handed military action to their 2016 attacks only aided ARSA's recruitment into village-level cells. ARSA consolidated its authority during the months following the end of military operations. Their second attack came just after midnight on 25 August 2017, against 30 police posts across Maungdaw plus a military base in Rathedaung. Human wave attacks, of mostly untrained local villagers armed with farm tools, attempted to overwhelm security forces. ARSA strategy appears to have been to incite a general uprising among the population, and through that, to liberate Maungdaw. Senior General Min Aung Hlaing, Myanmar's army chief, estimates there were up to 4,000 attackers, and 10,000 recruits to ARSA, although this may be his hyperbole.¹²

The military quickly labelled the attacks 'terrorism', creating panic, and launched renewed 'area clearance operations'. This time formal operations only lasted two weeks, but they were brutal. According to the State Counsellor's office, there were 97 armed engagements between the military and ARSA during these two weeks, resulting in the death of 371 suspected militants and 13 soldiers.¹³ The government claim the 6,842 houses burned in those two weeks were all torched by ARSA, not the military, to turn international sympathy towards themselves.¹⁴ There is little evidence to corroborate this. Instead, there are widespread reports of security forces burning villages and committing atrocities against Muslims, sometimes with support from Rakhine nationalists. At one point ARSA did issue instructions to burn Rakhine Buddhist villages—in direct contradiction to their repeatedly stated policy of not attacking civilians.¹⁵ Still, only three non-Muslim villages are known to have been burned as a result, before ARSA called a unilateral ceasefire. Most evidence points towards military violence being the primary cause of village destruction.

Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) calculate that between 9,430 and 13,750 Muslims died during the 31 days following the 25 August 2017 attacks, at least 6,700 directly due to violence.¹⁶ *Human Rights Watch* (HRW) claim evidence that security personnel raped hundreds of Muslims and engaged in systematic killings.¹⁷ The government denies these allegations, but a large number of reports are remarkably consistent. HRW's satellite image analysis shows at least 354 villages were partially or totally destroyed, including over 2/3 of all villages in Maungdaw.¹⁸ We have no figures detailing the number of Rakhine, Hindu and other non-Muslim civilians also attacked or killed, but mass Hindu graves have been unearthed in Maungdaw, and

¹² Min Aung Hlaing, *Conspirators of terrorist attacks and families flee to Bangladesh* (Facebook: Senior General Min Aung Hlaing, 16 November 2017, <http://bit.ly/2muFJY4>, retrieved 11 December 2017), and *Gallant efforts to defend the HQ against terrorist attacks and brilliant efforts to restore regional peace, security are honoured*, (Facebook: Senior General Min Aung Hlaing, 21 September 2017, <http://bit.ly/2hCQq9o>, retrieved 11 December 2017).

¹³ Union of Myanmar, *Breaking News-29: ARSA extremist terrorists open fire at security forces, torch homes* (State Counsellor Office Information Committee, The Republic of the Union of Myanmar, 4 September 2017, retrieved 4 October 2017, from www.statecounsellor.gov.mm/en/node/993) and *Breaking News-32: Humanitarian aid Provided to displaced people without segregation* (State Counsellor Office Information Committee, 5 September 2017, retrieved 4 October 2017, from www.statecounsellor.gov.mm/en/node/995).

¹⁴ Union of Myanmar, *163 killed, 91 missing from 9 Oct to 26 Sept in N-Rakhine 254 total casualty under ARSA terrorist attack* (State Counsellor Office Information Committee, 27 September 2017, retrieved 4 October 2017, from www.statecounsellor.gov.mm/en/node/1042).

¹⁵ ICG *Myanmar's Rohingya Crisis*, op. cit.

¹⁶ Médecins Sans Frontières, *Myanmar/Bangladesh: MSF surveys estimate that at least 6,700 Rohingya were killed during the attacks in Myanmar* (12 December 2017, <http://www.msf.org/en/article/myanmarbangladesh-msf-surveys-estimate-least-6700-rohingya-were-killed-during-attacks>).

¹⁷ Human Rights Watch, *Massacre by the River: Burmese Army Crimes against Humanity in Tula Toli* (19 December 2017).

¹⁸ Human Rights Watch, *Burma: 40 Rohingya Villages Burned Since October* (17 December 2017, available www.hrw.org/news/2017/12/17/burma-40-rohingya-villages-burned-october)

many Rakhine villagers also claim to have been attacked. Large numbers of Rakhine and ethnic minority villagers also fled the conflict area, moving deeper into Myanmar.

This all suggests violence impacted all groups in the area. In the chaos, the military, ARSA and local militias almost certainly all perpetrated violence against civilians. The military have a reputation for excess, making it is hard to believe they acted beyond reproach. Groups ranging from *Amnesty International*¹⁹ to the *Office of the High Commissioner of the United Nations Human Rights (OHCHR)*²⁰ all claim widespread and systematic human rights violations by security forces, targeting civilian populations with little or no regard for their connection to militants, with random shootings, arbitrary detention, rape, physical assault, torture, degrading treatment, looting and destruction of property. At the same time, ARSA and the Rakhine militias—not well-trained and drilled forces, and not necessarily in control of people who might act on their behalf—have also been implicated in attacks. Given the scale and ferocity of violence, against all sides, the most likely conclusion is that all sides have committed atrocities.

Muslim casualties, refugees and population remaining

This crisis has resulted in 671,500 Muslim refugees fleeing to Bangladesh since 25 August 2017 (as of 15 March 2018).²¹ If we including those who fled prior to August, there are 836,210 ‘Rohingya’ refugees in camps in Bangladesh (registered by the UNHCR, as at 15 March), or a total 1,092,136 ‘Rohingya’ residing in the country (according to Bangladesh Immigration & Passports Department).

UN sources estimate that over half the Muslim population of Maungdaw have now fled to Bangladesh (was previously 93% Muslim), and significant numbers from Buthidaung and Rathedaung. Virtually all Muslims have been expelled from the southern half of Maungdaw township. Nonetheless, an estimated 200,000+ Muslims do remain in villages in Maungdaw, Buthidaung and Rathedaung townships, and 200,000+ remain in villages in northern Central Rakhine: in Kyauktaw, Mrauk-U, Ponnagyun, Rathedaung, Minbya, Myebon, Pauktaw and Sittwe townships.²² A further 100,000+ live in internally displaced persons’ (IDP) camps dating from the 2012 violence, mostly around Sittwe.

It is notable that GWM’s flagship development program works primarily with ethnic Rakhine communities in northern Central Rakhine State, particularly in Kyauktaw and Mrauk-U, two of the townships in which some Muslims remain in villages. Given GWM already has long-term engagement in in 57+ such villages, a key challenge for these GWM programs, therefore, but also a significant opportunity, is to strengthen relations and help reduce tensions between ethnic Rakhine and the Muslim communities remaining in these areas, to secure longer-term communal peace in these areas and perhaps



MAP 3 Showing where Muslims remain

Estimates of ‘Rohingya’ Muslims remaining in Rakhine:-

- Southern Maungdaw township: none
- Northern Rakhine State (rest of Maungdaw, plus Buthidaung & Rathedaung townships), in villages: 200,000+
- Northern Central Rakhine State (Kyauktaw, Mrauk-U, Ponnagyun, Minbya, Myebon, Pauktaw and Sittwe townships), in villages: 200,000+
- Internally displaced persons (IDP) camps, mostly around Sittwe: 100,000+

¹⁹ Amnesty International, "We are at Breaking Point" Rohingya: Persecuted in Myanmar, Neglected in Bangladesh (19 Dec 2016).

²⁰ OHCHR, *Flash Report: Interviews with Rohingyas fleeing from Myanmar since 9 October 2016* (Office of the High Commissioner, United Nations Human Rights, Yangon. 3 February 2017).

²¹ IOM, *ISCG Situation Update: Rohingya Refugee Crisis, Cox's Bazar* (International Organization for Migration, Inter Sector Coordination Group, 25 March 2018).

²² Figures from UN OCHA, *Interim Humanitarian Response Plan: Myanmar, January-December 2018*, (United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, Yangon, November 2017) – updated by personal conversations with UN OCHA officials.

contribute towards wider reconciliation. Some 97% of the Muslims displaced from Rakhine have expressed a desire to return to Myanmar when conditions are right,²³ meaning there is likely to be a return of some scale or another over the years to come, the social foundations for which should be now be laid.

Arakan Army & Rakhine nationalism 2015-2018

There is a further dimension to this conflict, widely overlooked by the international community, that greatly affects conflict dynamics. This is the intense struggle by Rakhine nationalists for autonomy. This manifests in both armed ethnic violence against security forces and non-violent political struggle against the state more generally. This makes Rakhine the site of a three-way conflict, not only focussed on the Muslim 'Rohingya'.

The ethnic Rakhine struggle for autonomy dates to at least 1784, when they were conquered by the Burmans, meaning this struggle has a very long history. A large number of armed groups have fought the military since Independence in 1948. The *Arakan Army* (AA), founded in 2009, is the most recent of many, but now a significant force.²⁴ The AA was based in Kachin territory until 2015, training and fighting alongside the *Kachin Independence Army* (KIA) since conflict in Kachin resumed in 2011. They now have around 3,000 well-trained and battle-hardened soldiers,²⁵ are a member of the Northern Alliance,²⁶ and are expanding their operations in Rakhine.

The AA began moving forces to Rakhine in 2014. Their first armed attacks were in March 2015. A unit attacked military outposts in Paletwa Township, southern Chin State, across the border from northern Kyauktaw Township, gaining control of at least one military camp.²⁷ Clashes mounted during 2015, leading to a major military 'area clearance operation' to remove them in March 2016. In all, 70-80 armed clashes were reported during the first half of 2016, in northern parts of Kyauktaw, Ponnagyun, Rathedaung and Mrauk-U. Many dozens of soldiers were killed. At least 2,000 Rakhine villagers were displaced, despite the fact most fighting occurred in remote areas.²⁸ The crackdown was partially successful, with AA attacks subsiding for almost a year, but operations have picked up again in 2017 and 2018.

Particularly significant, AA attacks (and those of prior Rakhine insurgencies) have not attacked Muslims. Their struggle has been directed *entirely* against government forces and institutions. Even the villagers displaced have *all* been Rakhine. This conflict is thus about the power relationships between the ethnic Rakhine and the Burman-led state/military/majority. The AA grievance is systematic discrimination, and their loss of autonomy. The AA cause is not primarily, if at all, the removal of the Muslims from Rakhine. The AA has gone to great pains to make this point.

This dimension of the conflict, however, does not merely involve a small armed group in remote parts of the state. The Rakhine people also offer extensive support to nationalist political parties, such as the *Arakan National Party* (ANP), highlighting widespread Rakhine distrust of Burman leadership. Ethnic Rakhine voters (particularly in north and central Rakhine) have demonstrated their very strong aspirations for autonomy, and deep distrust of Burmans, at each of the three last elections (1990, 2010 and 2015). The ANP is currently the third largest party in both houses of the national parliament—despite being a

²³ Xchange, *Rohingya Repatriation Survey*, Xchange Foundation (23 May 2018). <http://xchange.org/rohingya-repatriation-survey/>.

²⁴ Other groups include, for example, the *Arakan People's Liberation Party* (APLP) founded in 1945, the *Arakan National Liberation Party* (ANLP) in 1960, the *Arakan Liberation Party* (ALP) in 1967, the *Arakan Independence Organisation* (AIO) in 1970, and the *National United Front (subsequently Party) of Arakan* (NUPA) in 1988. Rakhine nationalist ambition was also important in the 'red flag' *Communist Party of Burma* (CPB) rebellion from 1948, and the *Communist Party of Arakan* (CPA) established in 1962. For details see: Martin Smith, *Ethnic Groups in Burma: Development, democracy and human rights* (Anti-Slavery International, 1994); Martin Smith, 'Ethnic Conflicts in Burma: From separatism to federalism' in Tan (ed.), *A Handbook of Terrorism and Insurgency in Southeast Asia* (Edward Elgar, 2007), pp.293-321; Ashley South, *Ethnic Politics in Burma: States of conflict* (Routledge, 2008); and Bertil Lintner, *Burma in Revolt: Opium and Insurgency since 1948* (Silkworm, 1999).

²⁵ Burma News International, *Deciphering Myanmar's Peace Process: A reference guide 2016* (Chiang Mai, 2017).

²⁶ The Northern Alliance also includes the *Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army*, the *Ta-ang National Liberation Army*, and claims strong ties to the Chinese-backed *United Wa State Army* (UWSA), although this is a little overstated.

²⁷ Burma News International, op. cit., and Myanmar Peace Monitor, *Conflicts Archive* (Burma News International, 2017, www.mmpeacemonitor.org/conflict/conflict-overview/conflicts-archive).

²⁸ Nyan Lynn Aung, 'Rakhine chief minister says IDPs from all communities need aid', *Myanmar Times* (28 April 2016); Mratt Kyaw Thu, 'IDP numbers rise in Rakhine as forced labour allegations fly', *Frontier Myanmar* (6 May); Htet Kaung Linn, 'The army insists we give up our weapons, it's a major obstacle', *Myanmar Now* (8 July 2016)

single state ethnic party (it is the largest ethnic party)—and Rakhine nationalist parties had similar results in prior elections. The key difference between the AA and ANP, apart from the recourse to arms, is that the AA has refrained from any anti-Muslim positions while many ANP figures have vocally opposed all moves to verify documents, grant citizenship or otherwise expand the rights of the Muslim community.

Other recent incidents further highlight the depth of Rakhine feeling against the government. On 16 January 2018, a crowd of 5,000 Rakhine gathered in the ancient capital of Mrauk-U. They came to commemorate the 223rd anniversary of the kingdom's defeat by Burman forces, and Rakhine's forced integration into Burma. The authorities denied permission for the event, despite it having run every year previously, and security forces arrested two popular Rakhine leaders even as the crowd gathered. Both had given fiery speeches just prior to that event, praising the AA, calling for Rakhine independence, and urging the Rakhine people to mobilise. Shortly after 10pm, police opened fire on the Rakhine crowd with live ammunition, killing 9 civilians and injuring 19 others. Two weeks later the Mrauk-U township administrator who had authorised this action was assassinated, by people believed linked to the AA. Then, less than 6 weeks after the deadly attacks, 3 bombs were detonated in Sittwe: outside the home of the Rakhine State Secretary, the land office, and a court.

These deadly events demonstrate the deep-seated resentment, even seething anger, against the security forces and Burman-led government held by a growing proportion of the ethnic Rakhine community. Their antipathy is palpable, and escalating. A large number of Rakhine feel existentially threatened by the Burman-led state (not, or not just, the Muslims). Many perceive state security forces and non-Rakhine administrative officials to be a Burman colonial or occupational force. Of particular significance to GWM, the current focal points of this armed conflict and extreme nationalism is around Mrauk-U, Kyauktaw and Sittwe townships, all areas in which GWM primarily operates. This conflict dimension thus cannot be ignored in GWM decision-making and conflict-sensitive responses.

National League for Democracy: wedged between the military and international outrage?

The crisis in Rakhine, particularly the plight of the Muslim 'Rohingya', has prompted wave after wave of international condemnation. *Yale Law School*,²⁹ *University of London*,³⁰ *Al Jazeera*,³¹ *Amnesty International*³² and *Human Rights Watch*,³³ amongst many others, have published scathing reports. The *United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights*, Zeid bin Ra'ad Al-Hussein, declared in September 2017 that 'Myanmar's treatment of the Rohingya appears to be a textbook example of ethnic cleansing'.³⁴ A February 2017 UN report found the 'very likely commission of crimes against humanity'.³⁵ Former-US Secretary of State, Rex Tillerson, declared in November that the situation clearly constitutes ethnic cleansing, and British, French and a host of other political leaders have spoken out against it. The matter has even been discussed by the *UN Security Council*. In December, the *UN Human Rights Council* condemned 'probable commission of crimes against humanity' in Rakhine, and in February 2018, High Commissioner Zeid bin Ra'ad Al-Hussein included Rakhine alongside Syria, Yemen and Congo as the 'the

²⁹ Yale Law School, *Persecution of the Rohingya Muslims: is Genocide Occurring in Myanmar's Rakhine State? A Legal Analysis*, (prepared for Fortify Rights by Allard K Lowenstein International Human Rights Clinic, 2015).

³⁰ Penny Green, Thomas MacManus & Alicia de la Cour Venning. *Countdown to Annihilation: Genocide in Myanmar* (International State Crime Initiative of Queen Mary University of London, 2015).

³¹ For example, Al Jazeera, *Breaking down genocide in Myanmar* (Al Jazeera Investigates, 28 October 2015) and *Genocide Agenda* (Al Jazeera Investigates, 28 October 2015).

³² For example, Amnesty International, *Myanmar: "We are at Breaking Point" Rohingya: Persecuted in Myanmar, Neglected in Bangladesh* (19 December 2016), *"My World is Finished": Rohingya targeted in crimes against humanity in Myanmar* (18 October 2017) and *"Caged without a roof": Apartheid in Myanmar's Rakhine State* (21 November 2017).

³³ For example, Human Rights Watch, *'All You Can Do is Pray': Crimes against humanity and ethnic cleansing of Rohingya Muslims in Burma's Arakan State* (22 April 2013), *Burma: New Satellite Images Confirm Mass Destruction: 288 Villages, Tens of Thousands of Structures Torched* (17 October 2017) and *Massacre by the River: Burmese Army Crimes against Humanity in Tula Toli* (19 December 2017).

³⁴ Ben Westcott & Karen Smith, 'Rohingya violence a 'textbook example of ethnic cleansing, UN rights chief says'. *CNN Edition* (11 September 2017).

³⁵ OHCHR, *Flash Report*, op. cit.

most prolific slaughterhouses of humans in recent times.³⁶ He has repeatedly urged the creation of a mechanism for criminal investigation of violence against Muslims in Rakhine.

Aung San Suu Kyi presented herself as a champion of human rights for decades, and the world threw her accolades. The collective disappointment with her response to this situation has thus been enormous. She was already widely criticised for remaining silent on this issue, before inheriting power. Criticism has only mounted since then, for failing to use her moral authority to protect the Muslims. For example, Keith Harper, former US ambassador to the *UN Human Rights Council*, voiced concerns that,

while Daw Suu Kyi was perfectly comfortable reaping benefits as a human rights icon for her own pro-democracy struggle, she is not prepared to display the political courage necessary to take a stand for an unpopular Muslim minority group and prevent the grave and systematic denial of their human rights.³⁷

In March 2017, the UN Rapporteur Yanghee Lee, went so far as to suggest to the *Human Rights Council* that the NLD, not just the military, 'may be trying to expel the Rohingya population from the country'.³⁸

While we share this collective disappointment, and believe there is more Aung San Suu Kyi and the NLD government should do, we also note that of the plethora of problems facing Myanmar at this time, this is *the* most sensitive and complex, and the most likely to derail the whole national reform effort. And we note this crisis, was inherited by this government, rather than created by them, and in a form that has left them with few political options.

Aung San Suu Kyi and her government are locked in a power struggle with the military. The crisis in Rakhine has them wedged, politically. Under the flawed 2008 Constitution, the military controls the three security ministries overseeing most key functions in Rakhine, namely defence, police and borders/border regions. They have constitutional authority to run these ministries without government oversight. Thus, the key portfolios effecting Rakhine State, and the actions that have so frightened and angered both the Muslims and Rakhine, are beyond government control.

The military is not popular in any other armed conflict in Myanmar, all of which involve the action against citizens. The Muslims of northern Rakhine, however, are popularly perceived as 'external' to the nation, widely held to not have rights to citizenship. Despite their heavy-handedness, by labelling this a terrorist threat and dealing with it decisively, the military have enhanced their legitimacy with many as the protector of the State. This is aided by the fact public opinion across Myanmar is strongly anti-'Rohingya'. Given the NLD government are attempting to limit the political power of the military and recast the place of the military in society, this is a significant win for the military. The NLD's reform ambitions go well beyond Rakhine issues, to constitutional reform, further democratisation, peace across the rest of the country, economic liberalisation, and so on. Every one of these issues requires military cooperation. Challenging the military publicly over Rakhine or humiliating them domestically and internationally (assuming for a moment that deep down Aung San Suu Kyi and the NLD would like to exercise such moral leadership), would almost certainly stall all other reform. This leaves few options on Rakhine.

Aung San Suu Kyi and the NLD are thus wedged between two powerful groups, both undermining their legitimacy and power to act for their own ends. Domestically, nationalists with support from the military portray the government as weak in protecting Buddhism, and demand a hard line against the Muslims. International actors, on the other hand, portray the government as colluding in human rights abuses, ethnic cleansing and genocide. Both seriously challenge the government's legitimacy and, together, wedge the government into a position of inability to act. Any sustainable peace will rely very heavily on the cooperation of both the NLD and military. Public shaming of the people you must later rely upon, especially if that shaming does not acknowledge of their legitimate responsibilities, fears and constraints, does little to win such cooperation.

³⁶ OHCHR, *37th session of the Human Rights Council: Opening statement by UN High Commissioner for Human Rights* (Office of the High Commissioner, United Nations Human Rights, 26 February 2018).

³⁷ Keith Harper, 'Will the World be Silent in Face of the Rohingya Calamity?—The time has come for a UN Commission of Inquiry', *Just Security* (27 February 2017).

³⁸ Yanghee Lee, *Statement by Ms. Yanghee LEE, Special Rapporteur on the Situation of Human Rights in Myanmar at the 34th session of the Human Rights Council* (United Nations Human Rights, Office of the High Commissioner, 13 March 2017).

Long history, intractability

The last section explored the three major dimensions of this conflict, highlighting the complexity and the difficult position of the NLD government. This next section briefly examines history and the use of historical narratives.

Not recent or new

One major misconception about the conflict in Rakhine is that it is recent. It is not, particularly if we define conflict as both violent and non-violent. Certainly, there were long periods of relative calm before 2012, with many cases of good person-to-person and village-to-village relations. And there are still examples of positive Muslim-Buddhist communal relations, economic interdependence and friendships, although these are now fewer and more strained. Nonetheless, fear, grievance and tension, on all sides, have resided just below the surface for decades. Thus while a recent explosion of ethnonationalist sentiment has further polarised each population, this conflict is deeply historical. Profound social cleavages date back more than a century, communal violence has occurred in cyclical bouts since at least World War II (WWII), and armed groups have fought for Rakhine or 'Rohingya' independence almost continually. The result of this violence has been at least four previous mass exoduses from Arakan/Rakhine, in 1784, 1942, 1978 and 1991-92. The history of conflict is thus long and bloody, and the underlying issues so serious they will not be easy to resolve. We thus suggest that sympathetic and informed understanding of history is essential to any peacebuilding or conflict transformation work.

The violence of WWII is particularly significant.³⁹ WWII arrived in Arakan in 1942. Most Muslims remained loyal to the British, while the Arakanese aligned with the Burman nationalists, and hence the Japanese. As the Japanese-Burman-Arakanese forces chased an estimated 500,000 colonial officials and sympathisers out of Burma, overland through Arakan and Assam, the British mobilised Muslim volunteers for intelligence and guerrilla operations. Many historians suggest that without the Muslim help, the British would have been defeated in Arakan and the Japanese would have reached Chittagong. Muslims and Rakhine were thus both mobilised during WWII, on opposite sides. The violence that ensued was bloody, with horrendous massacres on both sides. British officials in Arakan at the time attest to the extent of violence, resulting in almost complete segregation as each community fled the destruction. There are no reliable figures, but estimates suggest perhaps 22,000 Muslims fled to what is now Bangladesh, 35,000-43,000 Rakhine were permanently displaced out of Maungdaw and Buthidaung, and probably as many Muslims fled from the central and southern Rakhine into these townships.

The Muslim majority in Maungdaw and Buthidaung, and relatively low numbers of Muslims in central and southern Rakhine, thus dates primarily from WWII. These massacres and widespread acts of ethnic cleansing, perpetrated by both ethnic Rakhine and Muslims, have never been thoroughly addressed. Many people in Rakhine today are thus very familiar with personal stories of relatives and friends having been driven out of their homes, never to return. Every bout of violence since then has been deeply rooted in the memory of these historical injustices, the ongoing memory of displacement and segregation, and the withdrawal of British patronage for the Muslims at Independence. The unresolved grievances from this period have sustained conflict tensions for more than seven decades. It is thus impossible to formulate any pathway towards long-term resolution without acknowledging and engaging with this history, and the fears and grievances it breeds.

³⁹ For details on the impact of WWII, see: Moshe Yegar, *Muslims of Burma*, op. cit.; Martin Smith, *Ethnic Group*, op. cit.; Peter Murray, 'Secret' Correspondence (*Perspective of on the troubles in North Arakan*) (to Robert W.D. Fowler, Commonwealth Relations Office, 26 January 1949, held in UK Foreign Office SW1, F 1323/1015/79); Peter Murray, *The British Military Administration of North Arakan 1942-4* (private communication, 1980, available www.burmalibrary.org); Robert Mole, *The Temple Bells are Calling: A personal record of the last years of British rule in Burma*, (Pentland, 2001), and Jacques Leider, *Conflict & Mass Violence in Arakan (Rakhine State): The 1942 Events & Political Identity Formation*, (in South & Lall eds, *Citizenship in Myanmar*, Chiang Mai, 2018, pp.193-221).

*Intractable conflict, competing narratives*⁴⁰

Rakhine is embroiled in an 'intractable conflict'. By definition, intractable conflicts are protracted and violent, with perceived existential threats on all sides and a widespread belief that the issues are irreconcilable. Extensive research has been conducted on such conflicts in Northern Ireland, Israeli-Palestine, Sri Lanka, Chechnya, Kashmir and Africa. One key finding is that such conflicts usually involve, amongst other things, an irreconcilable clash of historical narratives, particularly those narratives by which group identities are defined.

Every nation and ethnic group needs a historical narrative, accounts that tell the story of the group's past. Narratives are continually constructed and reinvented, from historical and sometimes mythological events, to shape group identity and social cohesion, inform intergroup relations, and give understanding to contemporary social reality. Nations and ethnicities use such narratives to propagate and justify images of themselves and 'the Other', and to build cultural identities.

People living with long-term conflict must cope with serious stress. Societies cope with the harsh psychological conditions of unending vulnerability and uncertainty by developing a 'sociopsychological infrastructure'. One key aspect of this is that historical narratives become hegemonic and rigid, aimed at convincing themselves and others (especially the international community) of the past injustices committed against them—and hence the other party's immoral actions. This sense of injustice may be real or perceived. Members of each group commit themselves to their competing historical narratives, regardless of evidence, because their version of history defines their identity, grievances and claims. Cognitive freezing prevents members from critically challenging any alternative narratives, or listening to any other accounts, meaning they end up only selectively hearing and propagating information consistent with their already-held beliefs.

What this means is that history is heavily disputed in Rakhine, and that this is important and should not be ignored. Indeed, one of the things making peacebuilding in intractable conflicts seem so impossible is this irreconcilable stalemate of historical narratives: the contradictory claims about history, the dogma that prevents any questioning of these narratives, and the illogical or ahistorical assertions endlessly repeated by one or more groups. Importantly though, these historical narratives are not so much about the history itself as about the grievances the various parties feel today, and how they understand the key drivers of the conflict. Thus, tempting as it is to push disputed history to the side, as a minor issue, these narratives cannot be ignored. They are so often repeated precisely because they sum up the grievances and issues to the people themselves. Discussing and establishing a middle ground of moderate, agreed and documented history is therefore not just a side issue, but can be integral to unfreezing the cognitive and rhetorical positions maintaining the sociopsychological repertoire of conflict mobilisation.

A middle-road history

There has been insufficient critical analysis of local historical sources to speak confidently about records and events prior to the 16-17th centuries.⁴¹ What we do know points to Arakan being home to a series of independent Hindu city-states prior to the 15th century.⁴² The Arakanese, closely related to the ethnic Burmans, began migrating to the area in about the 9th century, gaining control of the region from about the 11th.⁴³ They then led a strong kingdom at Mrauk-U from 1430 until conquered by the Burmese in 1784.

⁴⁰ Intractable conflict is best researched and described by Daniel Bar-Tal, *Intractable Conflicts: Socio-psychological foundations & dynamics* (Cambridge, 2013). See also Louis Kriesberg, 'Intractable Conflict', *Peace Review*, Vol.5 (1993), pp.417-421; Sandra Jovchelovitch, 'Narrative, Memory and Social Representations: A conversation between history and social psychology.' *Integrative Psychological & Behavioral Science*, Vol.46 (2012) pp.440-456; Landon E Hancock, 'Narratives of Identity in the Northern Irish Troubles.' *Peace & Change*, Vol.39 (2014) Iss.4, pp.443-467; and Cathryn Nicholson, 'The Role of Historical Representations in Israeli-Palestinian Relations: Narratives from abroad.' *Peace & Conflict*, Vol.22 (2016) Iss.1, pp.5-11.

⁴¹ Speaking of the historical records for the first millennia CE, Noel Singer, *Vaishali & the Indianization of Arakan* (APA Publishing, 2008), p.x suggested the history of this era is "shrouded in what appears to be an impenetrable haze ... sabotaged by inaccurate information by native chroniclers of a later age ... [and fantasies] slavishly repeated" by some foreign writers.

⁴² Noel Singer, *op. cit.* Also van Galen, *op. cit.*

⁴³ Pamela Gutman, *Ancient Arakan: With special reference to its cultural history between the 5th and 11th centuries*. (Doctor of Philosophy Thesis, Australian National University, 1976).

The point of contention is when any sizeable Muslim population arrived in the area. Several Muslim authors claim the local population converted to Islam *en masse* over a millennium ago, who then assimilated several waves of Muslim migration and settlement, and have lived alongside the Rakhine from the time they arrived. There is little corroborating evidence for this. This account of Islam in the pre-Arakanese kingdoms is more mythological than substantiated.⁴⁴ The first clear evidence of any significant Muslim presence in Arakan coincides with the rise of Mrauk-U. Beginning as a small agrarian kingdom, Mrauk-U grew into a significant regional power by the early 17th century, ruling Muslim Chittagong and asserting influence across the Bay of Bengal. Part of the of trade and cultural continuum which existed around the Bay of Bengal, as already mentioned, this kingdom has significant engagement with parts of the Muslim world from the time it was founded. Thus, while the Mrauk-U kings were Buddhist, many Muslims held high positions and from the beginning most kings adopted both Muslim and Buddhist titles.⁴⁵

Muslim influence and presence in Arakan therefore dates to at least the 15th century, and clearly grew during the period. By the 16th and 17th centuries, Portuguese slave traders brought a large number of Muslim captives from Bengal. Many were sold on to the Dutch, so the number actually settled in Arakan is not clear, but was significant. Many Muslims argue that the name *Kaladan*—given to the Kaladan River and the region encompassing much of Mrauk-U and Kyauktaw today—means ‘dwelling of foreigners’, due to the largescale resettlement of ‘*kala*’ (foreign dark skinned) Muslim slaves. This argument has merit. There is thus strong evidence of a significant Muslim population in Arakan (Rakhine) well before the Colonial era, perhaps constituting up to ten percent of the population by the 17th and 18th centuries.⁴⁶

Arakan was conquered by the Burmese in 1784, then taken by the British just 40 years later, in the First Anglo-Burmese War (1824-1826). It remained under colonial administration until Burma’s Independence in 1948. Rakhine was thus only part of the Burmese empire for 40 years, apart from a few brief periods before the 15th century. The conquering Burmese went to considerable lengths to destroy their history, culture and identity, something well-remembered by most Rakhine.⁴⁷ ‘Rohingya’ historians add that, even more than for the Rakhine, the Burman conquerors attempted to write Muslims completely out of Arakanese history, through the deliberate destruction of their heritage and place in history.⁴⁸ Again, there is merit to these accounts, which underlie most of the ambition of both groups today for autonomy.

During the Colonial period (1824-1948), British administrators significantly expanded agriculture in the region, to the point that during the 1840s Akyab (Sittwe) became the largest rice exporter in the world. To support this expansion, the British sponsored extensive labour migration. Our analysis of Colonial population data, particularly Census data,⁴⁹ shows that the Muslim population of Akyab District (northern Rakhine) grew more than 4-fold between 1872 and 1931, for example, while the Buddhist population grew less than 2-fold. Thus, while there was a reasonable population of Muslims in Arakan before the British took control, mostly descendants of slaves, this population was swamped by a huge influx of immigrants from British India. These migrants assimilated into the pre-existing Muslim population, to become a hybridised community,⁵⁰ the ancestors of the people who today call themselves ‘Rohingya’.

During WWII, as already noted, there were horrific encounters between Muslims and Buddhists in Rakhine. After Independence, as has also already been noted above, both Muslim and Rakhine armed ethnic insurgencies emerged, during a period much of the country was awash with armed ethnic rebellions. Muslims sought control of the north and Rakhine sought control of the whole state, including the north.

⁴⁴ Several writers claim such a mass conversion occurred before the founding of the dynasty at Vaishali in 788, but Singer, *Vaishali*, op. cit. confirms that this pre-Rakhine kingdom was clearly Hindu, with no evidence of significant Muslim influence.

⁴⁵ Gutman, *Ancient Arakan*, op. cit. Also Thibaut d’Hubert & Jacques Leider, ‘Traders and Poets in Mrauk-U: Commerce & Cultural Links in Seventeenth Century Arakan’, in Mukherjee (ed.), *Pelagic Passageways: Dynamic Flows in the Northern Bay of Bengal World before the Appearance of Nation States* (Ratna Sagar, 2008).

⁴⁶ See Ware & Laoutides, *Myanmar’s ‘Rohingya’ Conflict*, op. cit. for the basis for this estimate.

⁴⁷ For example, Arthur P Phayre, ‘On the History of Arakan,’ *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal*, Vol.1 (1844), p.23 notes that after the conquest “the ancient chronicles were sought after with avidity, and destroyed or carried away, in the hope apparently of eradicating the national feeling.”

⁴⁸ For example, see Mohd. A Alam, *The Rohingyas: A Short Account of their History and Culture* (Arakan Historical Society, 2000).

⁴⁹ See Ware & Laoutides, *Myanmar’s ‘Rohingya’ Conflict*, op. cit. for complete data and analysis.

⁵⁰ This idea is best elaborated by Jacques Leider, ‘Competing Identities and the Hybridized History of the Rohingyas’, in Egreteau & Robinne (eds), *Metamorphosis: Studies in Social and Political Change in Myanmar* (NUS Press, 2015)—although we find that Leider tends to downplay the size and importance of the pre-existing Muslim community.

These competing claims stoked communal tensions. Then, from the time of Ne Win's coup in 1962, the policy of successive military regimes worked to politically marginalise and exclude the Muslims, while military operations repeatedly targeted the Muslims.

The key point, however, of primary relevance to this conflict, is that the ancestors of the Muslims who call themselves 'Rohingya' are a mixture of long-term residents of the state, mostly descendants of slaves, and colonial-era migrants. Various actors in this conflict usually take one of these two positions in isolation, as if the ancestors of all of the Muslims were either indigenous *or* recent migrants, in order to make political claims for or against the rights of these people today, rights to particular types of citizenship, to governance over land and territory, etc. Historical discussions that negotiate middle ground recognising this mix of ancestry, and thus the absurdity of contemporary rights being solely determined by such history, is highly relevant to conflict transformation.

Key conflict drivers

Political inclusion, indigenous rights

Rival claims over territory and governance have become central to this conflict, particularly the Rakhine-Muslim communal dimension. Nonetheless, the most central issue driving this conflict is a question over who should be politically included at the centre of Burmese polity, and to what degree.

Myanmar is comprised of a very large number of ethnic nationalities. Even at Independence, the challenge of nation-building was immense. Burman historical narratives have long sought to portray a unity with the minority nationalities, as a cohesive whole under their headship. Since the Ne Win-era, and codified in the 1982 Citizenship Law, this has been expressed in terms of a political community of historically related 'national races' (Burmese: *taing-yin-tha*). This political community is seen to include the ethnic Rakhine, but the Rakhine, like most other ethnic minorities nationally, do not feel that inclusion to be offered on an equal basis. Rather, they perceive this drive towards unity as more an attempt to assimilate them culturally and politically, a process of 'Burmanisation'. Such feeling is actually central to the grievances at the heart of most of the armed ethnic conflicts across the country.⁵¹ Most ethnic Rakhine today thus have a very deep fear of assimilation, a fear they will lose the very essence of Rakhine-ness to state-enforced Burmanisation, and thus they feel existentially threatened by the government and military. Their long history of independence only amplifies their strong nationalistic ambition, and their struggle for political autonomy is thus primarily about preserving their history, culture and identity.

For the Muslim community of northern Rakhine, this same Burman narrative about a political community of historically related 'national races' (*taing-yin-tha*) has been mobilised to exclude them altogether. The point—and the problem—is that the government's list of 135 *taing-yin-tha* does not include 'Rohingya', because they are not seen to share the same historical relationships. *Taing-yin-tha* has been deliberately defined to exclude them, and groups like them: ethnic races settled in the Union as their permanent home before the British arrived, thus the date set is pre-1823 CE. As noted above, while there was a significant Muslim community in Rakhine prior to this date, colonial population data shows the majority of 'Rohingya' ancestors arrived after 1823. Myanmar's 1982 Citizenship Law grants automatic citizenship to members of 'national races'. Other people, those not *taing-yin-tha* (such as the Muslims of northern Rakhine), must apply for citizenship, creating a two-tiered citizenship system. The absurdity and exclusionary politics of such an arbitrary date means that, despite the fact most have ancestors who have lived in the country for a century if not much longer, the Muslims of northern Rakhine are not automatically granted citizenship, and it is easy for governments or officials at all levels to erect barriers to processing Muslim citizenship. Moreover, the Preamble of the 2008 Constitution defines the political community in Myanmar not as the aggregate of citizens, but of *taing-yin-tha*, thereby elevating *taing-yin-tha* membership above citizenship.⁵² The constitution has thus come to exclude groups like the 'Rohingya', by definition.

⁵¹ See Gustoff Houtman, *Mental Culture in Burmese Crisis Politics: Aung San Suu Kyi and the National League for Democracy* (Tokyo University of Foreign Studies, 1999) and Matthew J Walton, 'The 'Wages of Burman-ness': Ethnicity and Burman Privilege in Contemporary Myanmar,' *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, Vol.43 (2013) Iss.1, pp.1-27.

⁵² Nicholas Cheesman, 'How in Myanmar "National Races" Came to Surpass Citizenship and Exclude Rohingya,' *Journal of*

Further, and particularly significant, the 2008 Constitution makes any *taing-yin-tha* who constitute a majority in two adjacent townships potentially eligible for a 'self-administered zone'.⁵³ This means any acceptance of the Muslims of northern Rakhine as an indigenous national race would automatically grant them rights to not only citizenship, but the right to seek governance of the Maungdaw-Buthidaung region. It would seem that much of the politics that has sought to exclude them has thus been driven by that fear, a fear that if granted citizenship, the Muslims would inevitably then also qualify for some sort of self-administered zone. To many Rakhine, with the trauma of WWII still alive and fearing the loss of their cultural identity to a tide of Muslim migrants and Burmese assimilation, this is a terrifying prospect to be fought against vigorously. To many Burmans, this prospect feels like a loss of sovereignty and territorial integrity. Addressing and re-examining such historical narratives and exclusionary political categories, therefore, is central to addressing the contemporary issues, fears and grievances.

Economic interests, land and resources

While we have focussed on the historical narratives and issues around political rights, many other scholars propose that resources, revenues, the political economy and other economic motives are better explanations of most violent conflict. Certainly, economic factors are also very relevant in Rakhine. Despite having the lowest living standards in the country, Rakhine has extensive economic potential, creating powerful economic motives. For example, as already noted, Sittwe, the Rakhine capital, was once the largest exporter of rice in the world, but the extensive arable land does not currently produce the quality and quantity of rice attained per hectare in other regions and countries. Agricultural land will thus greatly appreciate in value as the ports and roads are better developed, access to rural finance increases, and the latest methods adopted. Fishing also remains underdeveloped. Extensive natural gas reserves off the coast are being developed by international companies in partnership with Burman-led national companies. Good deposits of minerals such as titanium and aluminium have also been found in the coastal sands, but are not yet being exploited. And the Maungdaw-Rathedaung coastline, with its pristine beaches, is being eyed for potential tourism development along the lines of Bangladesh's St Martin's Island, just 10km off the coast. There are thus many economic motives for various parties to eye off land and economic access in northern Rakhine, hence economic drivers behind the conflict.

A number of major economic projects further illustrate the fact that Rakhine is emerging as a place in which great economic profit and political power could be amassed. The Myanmar government has already set up a *Kyaukphyu Special Economic Zone* in central Rakhine, with a deep-sea port and oil-gas pipeline. It is developing the *Kaladan River Multi-Modal Project* to ship goods from the Indian mainland to its isolated northeastern Mizoram State, via Sittwe and the Kaladan River to Paletwa, then by road back into India. This route runs through both Sittwe, where goods need to be moved from ship to barge, significant since Muslims once controlled a large share of port work and local markets. It also runs right through the territory in which the AA is operational. This project will save India on transport costs and generate considerable revenue for actors in Myanmar, making it little surprise there is conflict at multiple points along the route. The *Maungdaw Economic Zone* has also been recently set up, to expand border trade with Bangladesh. Led by a consortium of companies from Maungdaw and Yangon, this has the potential to significantly change the local political economy around lucrative cross-border trade. Beyond this, the Chinese *Belt and Road Initiative* includes plans for a *Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar Economic Corridor*, intended to run from China to India through northern Rakhine State. If this proceeds, it could well be the biggest reshaping of regional geo-politics since the colonial era.

All of these factors create potential economic motivations for gaining control of land and concessions, and thus potentially contribute conflict. However, most of these economic drivers remain more potential opportunities than currently lucrative options, and with the exception of the AA conflict targeting the *Kaladan River Multi-Modal Project* route, few locals have articulated these as reasons they believe being behind the recent violence. We conclude, therefore, that while they are now emerging as potential new motivations, this is still an emerging dynamic and not the established reasons behind the conflict to this

Contemporary Asia, Vol.47 (2017) Iss.3, pp.461-483.

⁵³ Ardith Maung Thawngmung, 'The Politics of Indigeneity in Myanmar: Competing Narratives in Rakhine State.' *Asian Ethnicity*, Vol.17 (2016) Iss.4, pp.527-547.

point. These are therefore dangers to watch, with a particular need to protect local Muslim interests (and Rakhine one), while the conflict currently remains primarily around political inclusion/exclusion and identity.

*Identity conflict*⁵⁴

While primarily competing over political inclusion or exclusion, and the nature of those relations, the local actors have primarily framed this conflict around ethnic identities. The mobilisation of people towards ethnic (or religious) identities draws on simplistic nationalistic ideas, notions that the world can be simply and neatly categorised according to a single and overarching system. It presupposes that 'ethnic' identities are distinct and concrete, the most fundamental aspect of a person's identity, and that everyone fits (or should fit) neatly into just one single group. The world is thus seen as a collection of civilisations (or religions) in coexistence or conflict.

This is, however, a very over-simplistic way to view the world. In our normal lives, when not captured by such narrow conflict discourse, we recognise ourselves as having a multitude of social identities. For example, the one person can be, without any contradiction, a Christian, an Australian, a liberal, a woman, a mother, a teacher, a cyclist, a heterosexual, a champion of gay and lesbian rights, a vegetarian, an environmentalist, a classical musician, and a lover of jazz. Each of these collectivities, to which the person belongs simultaneously, are part of her particular identity and none sum up the entirety of her identity. A key danger, therefore, of an identity conflict is that key actors attempt to mobilise everyone towards a singular nationalistic notion of a particular ethnic, or ethno-religious identity, as being fundamental to their lives and predetermined by nature. In Rakhine State, for example, everyone is expected to either be a 'Rakhine Buddhist', a 'Rohingya Muslim', or a 'Burman Buddhist'. This one collectivity is expected to encapsulate their identity. Mobilisation pushes people to conform to these normalised views, such as a common outrage about the injustices the other group(s) are said to have perpetrated upon them. This, in turn, almost predestines them into the conflict, robbing people of choice. This is a key reason historical narratives become so integral to the conflict. Identity conflict attempts to reify political identities and homogenously collectivise groups.

Conflict analysis that does the same—inherently assuming it is mainly about ethnic/religious difference, and without nuance assuming everyone in the neat categories thinks and acts pretty much the same—only contributes to the conflict mobilisation. There are, of course, moderates and hardliners. There are those seeking peaceful co-existence, and those who see that as compromise. It is certain organisations and individuals that engage in violent actions, not 'ethnic' groups. Having a particular ethnic background does not, automatically, mean one ascribes to particular views or narratives. In effect, this language can amplify what conflict already does, seeing everyone as either Rakhine, Muslim or Burman, for example, rather than, say, farmer, women or bureaucrat. Most violence in Rakhine has been perpetrated by a few militant groups or the military, rather than by the Rakhine, Muslim and Burmans collectively. It is easy to frame every issue between any Rakhine and Muslim communities or individuals, for example, about the larger ethnic conflict. Rather than something small being just a crime, or a personal or local dispute, reading it as inherently being part of the conflict only amplifies tensions and helps mobilise for violence.

This means that any long-term resolution involves people becoming aware of the breadth and uniqueness of their multifaceted individual identities, the commonalities (not just differences) they have with people from the other identity group(s), and the extent of choice they have about who they want to be and how they want to respond. Interestingly, historically Burmese ideas about race or ethnicity were far more fluid than the West. For example, while the Burmese term *lu-myo* is most commonly translated as race, in pre-colonial times members of *lu-myo* identity groups appear to have had the curious ability to change group by changing residence, name, dress, religion and/or other cultural practice.⁵⁵ Central to the resolution of this conflict, is a re-capturing of this traditional notion of choice and fluidity in identity.

⁵⁴ The best discussion of this concept is Amartya Sen, *Identity and Violence: The illusion of destiny* (Norton, 2006).

⁵⁵ See Edmund R Leach, *Political Systems of Highland Burma: A study of Kachin social structure* (Athlone Press, 1970 [1954]) and Mandy Sadan, *Being and Becoming Kachin: Histories beyond the state in the borderworlds of Burma* (Oxford, 2013).

Double minority complex and the ethnic security dilemma

Finally, the academic concepts of 'double minority complex' and 'security dilemma', or 'ethnic security dilemma' in particular, are useful in further understanding the communal, Muslim-Rakhine dimension of this conflict.

The term 'double minority complex' was coined to describe conflicts such as Sri Lanka, Northern Ireland, Israel-Palestine and Cyprus.⁵⁶ Seen from a regional and social-psychological perspective, a majority group within a country or region can feel as if they are a threatened minority competing for territorial and cultural survival, if smaller local group is (or appears to be) closely linked to a populous or powerful neighbour.

The Muslim community in northern Rakhine are vulnerable and threatened. They are the minority. They are poor, lack citizenship, are denied many human rights and face severe mobility restrictions. They rightly feel existentially threatened. However, despite being twice as populous, and having far more secure rights, many ethnic Rakhine feel equally vulnerable and insecure. They not only feel threatened by the risk of assimilation by the Burmese, but also by the massive population in Bangladesh. With hundreds of millions of Muslims just across the border, and given Bangladesh has almost 15 times the population density of Rakhine, they feel tiny, insecure and existentially threatened. Sometimes, some react violently out of this feeling of extreme vulnerability and threat. In addition, the Muslims in Rakhine do have much higher birthrates and population growth rates than the Rakhine. Many Rakhine fear they are being driven out by the growing population, particularly remembering their loss of land in Maungdaw and Buthidaung during the WWII violence. They thus feel an extreme existential threat.

Indeed, the *Rakhine Inquiry Commission*⁵⁷ found that 84.7% of Rakhine surveyed attribute the violence in Rakhine State to alleged Muslim efforts to take over the entire state. In May 2015, for example, in response to a declaration by three Nobel Peace Prize laureates' that the Rohingya face 'nothing less than genocide', the Rakhine Affairs Minister for Yangon Region said that if genocide or ethnic cleansing was indeed taking place in Rakhine State, then it was against ethnic Rakhine, not the Muslims.⁵⁸ Such a statement illustrates that local perceptions of victim and violator are diametrically opposed to the image presented in international discourse. Both Muslims and the Rakhine, therefore, feel they are vulnerable and threatened minorities—a 'double minority complex'.

The final concept particularly useful in analysing this conflict for peacebuilding options is that of the 'ethnic security dilemma'.⁵⁹ The classic articulation of the 'security dilemma' suggests that the anarchical nature of the international system, in which all parties have limited knowledge of other countries' intentions, leads nation-states to maximise their military capability to increase their security and ensure their survival. This fear, however, risks rapid and serious escalation to war. This idea was then expanded to explain the disintegration of both Yugoslavia and the Soviet Union after the Cold War. The idea is that the relative anarchy of periods of transition within countries can amplify risk of a security dilemma between conflicting ethnic groups. In Myanmar, the transition to more democratic governance since the 2008 Constitution has created a high degree of uncertainty about policy going forward, including fears about local security, the authority of local officials to deal with emerging issues, and even the power of the military into the future. It has also allowed social media hate speech to flourish, and rumours to abound. In such a situation, particularly when groups have already become highly fearful of one another and the military, and largely isolated themselves for fear or threat, this theory argues that uncertainty about each other's intentions will lead them to judge the other through the lens of history. This usually draws on the worst examples of past inter-ethnic relations, like the WWII example. Communities that are socially segregated and relatively isolated from their elite are particularly vulnerable to such rumour, fear and overreaction, and to taking measures to protect themselves.

This exactly describes the situation in Rakhine, with a rapidly increasing sense of threat by all parties, and a growing susceptibility to rumour since 2012. Measures taken by one group to try to protect themselves have automatically been seen as threatening by other groups. The lack of any real remaining trusted lines

⁵⁶ Michalis S Michael, *Resolving the Cyprus Conflict: Negotiating History* (Palgrave, 2011).

⁵⁷ Union of Myanmar, *Final Report*, op. cit.

⁵⁸ Matt Schissler, Matthew J Walton & Phyu Phyu Thi, 'The Roots of Religious Conflict in Myanmar', *The Diplomat* (6 August 2015).

⁵⁹ Barry R Posen, 'The security dilemma and ethnic conflict' *Survival*, Vol.35 (1993), 27-47.

of communication between the key groups, by which moderates might attempt to informally and peacefully gain understanding of the intentions of the other and defuse tensions, have led to very rapid escalations on both sides.

Many of the Muslims, for example, increasingly fearful about their uncertain future after the 2012 attacks and being disenfranchised in the 2015 elections, and receiving no trustworthy communication of alternatives, began to see autonomous control of the areas they lived as the only remaining option. Many Rakhine, fearful at rumours some Muslims were arming themselves and training in the hills, and seeing military build-ups, pushed to form new local militias. Having heard rumours but lacking firm intelligence, the military then massively over-reacted to the first ARSA attacks in 2016. These were actually only on 3 small outposts, therefore not of themselves particularly significant in the context of other civil war action elsewhere in the country. The brutality of their response was fuelled by rumour and fear of a much larger mobilisation in progress, and it being Islamist jihadist in nature. Their viciousness in turn fuelled much greater recruitment to ARSA, as the security of the Muslim population was increasingly threatened in an information vacuum. The lack of information and loss of lines of communication left no means for moderates to act, on all sides, and no means for anyone to counter rumour or fear by exploring alternative pathways.

Thus, even when the Kofi Annan-led *Rakhine Advisory Commission* released its final report in August 2017,⁶⁰ offering recommendations to address the long-term grievances in Rakhine, many Muslims still obviously perceived this as only a further threat to their security. That is despite the report demanding the Muslims be granted citizenship and services be equitably delivered—and despite Aung San Suu Kyi and her government committing to implement all recommendations as quickly as possible. ARSA launched their second ARSA attack just hours after the report was released. The military read this response as nothing but a hate-filled Islamist terrorist attack, and responded with overwhelming military might out of fears that an ISIS-style threat had arrived. So, seeing the first signs of this overwhelming military response, almost all Muslims in the affected areas simply fled in blind panic. Classic security dilemma escalation, over and over. Even before this flight, absolute fear reigned on all sides, rumours dominated, and there was minimal communication of any sort between parties. For all actors, there were no alternatives, no basis for any trust towards the other(s), and no lines of communication left by which any moderate voices might have otherwise been able to try to deescalate the tensions, be a voice of reason. This last point is particularly important for thinking about solutions: the less back channels of communication exist, the less the opportunity for moderate actors to attempt to deescalate tensions (assuming there is ground to do so), significantly raising the risk of violent response to any provocation, even rumours.

Conclusion

Deep poverty coupled with intractable conflict has left the people of Rakhine in a dire situation—they cannot hope for sustainable development while violence may erupt at any time, in any place. Neither can they hope for peace where competition over resources, powerful vested interests and existential threats to identity, citizenship and resources abound. Attempting development without addressing the conflict could further fuel violence, the uneven benefits of development fuelling jealousy, rivalry, mistrust and fear. Likewise, attempting to facilitate peace without equitable sharing of resources and new opportunities through development is likely to contribute to escalated conflict tensions. Thus clearly, development and peacebuilding must be inter-twined in Rakhine State.

So, what are the implications for community-led development such as GWM's CDE in Rakhine State? Firstly, and most importantly, a focus on development alone will not bring about improved well-being and human security. Simultaneous work on peacebuilding and conflict resolution is required. Furthermore, a vast international relations literature demonstrates that conflict resolution cannot be maintained unless change occurs simultaneously at all levels of society (macro, meso and micro), meaning bottom-up work by agencies like GWM must be part of the picture. Thus, while many things are beyond the control or remit of a small NGO such as GWM, which works with local communities to bring community-led development, a bottom-up contribution to peacebuilding is welcome. It does, however, require simultaneous effort by international, national and state actors at the highest levels, to resolve the future of Rakhine State and its

⁶⁰ Kofi Annan et. al, op. cit.

people. Without major commitment at that level to addressing historic grievances, issues of governance, the denial of rights and citizenship, provision of justice and security for all, countering conflict narratives, combatting poverty and delivering equitable services to all communities, the people of Rakhine will remain in poverty and vulnerability.

The key points of relevance from the above analysis are the fact that dire poverty and the political economy cannot be ignored. The manner in which local actors are using historical narratives needs to be taken seriously and addressed. A re-writing and broad acceptance of a middle-road history would go a long way towards underpinning peacebuilding efforts. Finally, given the fundamental importance of identity to this conflict, sustainable peace will require a re-imagining of identities in order to rebuild a sense of inclusivity, a vision of a shared future.

PART B: Conflict-Sensitive Strategic Advice for GWM

GraceWorks Myanmar's *Community Development Education (CDE)* program

GWM's flagship program in Rakhine State, *Community Development Education (CDE)*, commenced in 2011 (thus just before the outbreaks of violence of recent years). CDE is a grassroots, bottom-up community development initiative based on community leadership and action. It seeks to empower individuals and communities with the agency required to meet their basic human needs, analysing and planning together to improve their living conditions. At the core of CDE is a process of *empowerment*, central to people identifying and addressing the complex problems they face due to entrenched disadvantage—achieved through an educative process, in which people trapped in poverty and oppression are helped to become aware of the nature of the issues they face, and the steps they can take to overcome them. The overall objective of CDE is to empower individuals and communities to solve their own problems, primarily with resources they can access themselves, by developing new understanding (Paulo Freire called it *conscientisation*, or *critical awareness-raising*) and skills. It seeks to help communities and individuals find the agency required to take control of their own futures, identifying the assets and resources they have available (including via social capital networks), and using these to solve key problems and issues which challenge them. CDE helps build capacity and partners with communities for long-term value, to enable personal empowerment and community-based development.

GWM partners with a local civil society agencies to train community-nominated facilitators in participatory community processes, and build representative committees and implementation teams. Facilitators are given ongoing training and support in a diversity of topics, which adapts to feedback and community priorities as these become apparent. They are trained in the use of participatory tools and processes, to facilitate the community analyse, plan and implement locally-concieved and led projects. The focus is on using local resources or drawing in resources from further afield via their social networks, rather than dependence on external funding, or through advocacy towards local authorities.

CDE currently operates primarily in central-northern Rakhine State, particularly in the townships of Mrauk-U and Kyauktaw. In total, with funding from several donors, the CDE program currently has a network of 23 trained and supported facilitators working across close to 70 villages. All projects are conceived, planned and implemented by the community, so are unique to each location. Many past projects have included: 1) improved village infrastructure enabling trade, community interaction and access to schools and healthcare, 2) improved health through initiatives such as hygiene awareness and installation of bio-sand filters for clean drinking water, and 3) construction or repair of school buildings and provision of education materials.

This section, Part B, explains the concept and implementation of conflict-sensitivity by international development organisations, and offers strategic advice for both mitigating the risks associated with GWM programs in Rakhine, and—more particularly—exploring options to build on the foundation of CDE to expand into new, carefully targeted peacebuilding opportunities. Primarily, this section thus takes the conflict analysis of the previous section and explores the opportunities for community development work to engage in or further peacebuilding, in areas of Kyauktaw, Mrauk-U, Ponnagyun, Rathedaung, Minbya, Myebon, Pauktaw and Sittwe that have both Muslim and Rakhine communities, who have been traumatised and affected by recent violence but are not themselves displaced.

Conflict-sensitivity

'*Conflict-sensitivity*' has become an umbrella term encompassing a diversity of analytical frameworks and tools adopted by international development agencies attempting to adapt interventions to conflict-affected contexts. Some of the key texts and other names for industry approaches to this, all commonly grouped under this heading, include Kenneth Bush's *Peace and Conflict Impact Assessments (PCIA)*,⁶¹ Mary B Anderson's *Do No Harm*⁶² and Thania Paffenholz & Luc Reyhler's *Aid for Peace*.⁶³

⁶¹ Kenneth Bush, *A Measure of Peace* (International Development Research Centre, 1998).

⁶² Mary B Anderson, *Do No Harm: How aid can support peace—or war* (Lynne Rienne, 1999).

⁶³ Thania Paffenholz & Luc Reyhler, *Aid for Peace* (Nomos Verlagsgesellschaft: Germany, 2007).

While there are marginal differences in the detail of each of these approaches, they all involve using some form of conflict analysis to try to anticipate the interaction between development interventions and the context, leading to adaptations to programming. The aim is to understand the conflict dynamics well enough to be able to anticipate the interaction between planned development interventions and the conflict, in order to minimise the risks and negative effects, and maximise positive impacts from the programs. In other words, conflict-sensitivity seeks to analyse the conflict dynamics, then use this understanding to alter program design in order to:

- mitigate the risks to recipients, partners and others, including risk the development activities might inadvertently make the conflict worse;
- mitigate the risks to the development activities, posed by the conflict; and
- amplify the peacebuilding benefits, or embed new peacebuilding elements into the design of projects, to help facilitate moves away from violence and towards peaceful resolution.

Conceptually all of the above approaches place emphasis on understanding and addressing the proximate issues over root causes, meaning they advocate analysing what *currently* divides and connects conflicting parties. Conflict-sensitivity is anchored in the pragmatic realism of scholars such as John Paul Lederach and Lisa Schirch.⁶⁴ Lederach's *Preparing for Peace*,⁶⁵ for example, argues that peacebuilding is most effective when built upon existing points of potential conciliation, and thus offer ways to identify 'connectors' or 'bridges' between parties. Most *conflict-sensitive* approaches emphasise identifying and building upon such 'connectors' or 'bridges' between parties. Mary B Anderson's *Do No Harm* approach⁶⁶ describes these as 'local capacities for peace', a useful concept—what groups, relationships, structures, sectors, interests, etc. have the capacity to build greater peace? Anderson suggests that these 'connectors' or 'local capacities for peace' can exist in: systems and institutions; attitudes and actions; values and interests; experiences; and/or symbols and occasions. Lisa Schirch's *Ritual and Symbol in Peacebuilding*⁶⁷ suggests that these could reside in shared systems, institutions, attitudes, actions, values, interests, experiences, symbols and/or occasions—or in personal, relational, cultural and structural dimensions.

Thus, 'connectors', 'bridges', 'local capacities for peace' or shared public culture shared between conflict groups, whatever we describe them as, are all similar ideas. They describe things that might form a basis upon which peacebuilding activities may gain traction. The central question for conflict-sensitivity is thus, how will or could projects minimise the divisions between parties, strengthen the connectors and build upon that which is already shared and has a capacity to support greater peace. We add that, because this is an intractable conflict, historical grievances as articulated in contemporary narratives are at least as important as, and may be different to, what are identified as the proximal issues. In other words, we argue that some of the most important things that divide or connect conflicting parties may be deeply historical, with their understanding of contemporary reality being articulated through historical narratives. Historical narratives are thus actually not about the history *per se*, but the way contemporary reality is viewed by conflicting parties. These narratives, therefore, should be carefully analysed. Whilst invariably formulated around grievances and difference, they are also a key source for identifying 'connectors', 'bridges', 'local capacities for peace' or shared public culture.

In adopting *conflict-sensitivity*, we are also cognisant of the key criticisms of the approach. In practice, critics suggest,⁶⁸ application commonly focuses more on problem-solving, mitigating risk and avoiding unintended consequences than deliberately contributing to conflict transformation. Critics also argue that the impact of local sub-group and intra-communal power relations are commonly ignored, as are the actions and role of international actors and the political economy that helps perpetuate conflict. We take this critique on board, and focus advice very largely on the opportunities to embed work or design activities around intended peacebuilding and conflict transformation outcomes, and seek to actively engage

⁶⁴Lisa Schirch, *Ritual and Symbol in Peacebuilding* (Kumarian, 2004).

⁶⁵ John Paul Lederach, *Preparing for Peace* (Syracuse University Press, 1995).

⁶⁶ Mary B Anderson, *Do No Harm*, op. cit. Also her 'Enhancing Local Capacity for Peace', in Luc Reyhler & Thania Paffenholz (eds), *Peacebuilding: A field guide* (Lynne Rienner, 2001).

⁶⁷ Schirch, *Ritual and Symbol*, op. cit.

⁶⁸ See: Jonathan Goodhand, *Aiding Peace? The role of NGOs in armed conflict* (Rienner, 2006); and Roger Mac Ginty, *No War, No Peace: The rejuvenation of stalled peace processes and peace accords* (Palgrave, 2006).

questions of sub-group and intra-communal power relations, the reputation of international actors and the impact of the political economy.

As noted above, *conflict-sensitivity* seeks to apply detailed conflict analysis to do three things:

- mitigate the risks to people from the development activities;
- mitigate the risks of the conflict to the development activities; and
- amplify the peacebuilding benefits or embed new peacebuilding elements into projects.

The following three sections will discuss each of these in turn, with a focus primarily on the last, the peacebuilding opportunities.

Mitigating risks of CDE to people

We have identified three risks CDE potentially poses, all inadvertent impacts of the CDE program, to recipients, partners or others. These are detailed below, with a discussion of how to minimise each.

1. *Empowerment and agency—given social media, empowerment for what?*

Risk: The CDE program is built around the central idea of empowerment and enhancing agency. It seeks to help people move from being passive victims of circumstance, submerged in forces beyond their control, to taking control of their situation and instituting action to bring about a more desirable future. It is based on the idea of *conscientisation* (*critical awareness-raising*), meaning to help people look beyond the immediate issues that overwhelm, to become more critically aware of the causes of their oppression and act against those causes. However, the danger is that in an intractable conflict situation, in which most of the updates people receive via social media amplify extreme nationalist sentiments, it is quite possible some could use this increased empowerment and agency to mobilise towards violence. This is totally against the aims of the program, yet quite conceivable for people in the context. Recent feedback in CDE training has seen some facilitators express extreme levels of trauma and anger, which must be addressed. And we have certainly seen the negative impact of social media in the West, where large segments of society become more overtly xenophobic and racist—and felt more empowered to act that out—because of social media narratives, rather than access to more information via social media automatically making people more pluralistic, liberal and cosmopolitan. Social media has aided populist and knee-jerk, divisive responses in the West, rather than *critical* awareness of issues. CDE empowerment runs a real risk of being subverted by social media in Rakhine, for conflict mobilisation.

Mitigation: CDE *must* incorporate aspects to address trauma, develop critical thinking (e.g. in the process of planning of projects), increase empathy and address intra-communal violence as a precursor for inter-communal violence (although not using those terms!). Educational is required about social media, and the use of social media in emancipatory ways. Programming should address gender-based violence in particular, and plan non-violent parenting, school discipline and interpersonal conflict resolution processes. CDE should also focus on building everyday peace, empathy for the positions of the ‘others’ in the conflict, and non-violent encounters with ‘the other’, to keep alternative responses clearly in focus, and incorporate means for people to reimagine their own identities and a prosperous, shared future.

2. *Resistance to overt attempts at change*

Risk: The Rakhine see themselves as peaceful, just victimised, neglected and threatened. Any programming perceived as judgemental and paternalistic will be rejected, and overtly seeking to change their attitude will be read that way and resisted. Any programming that seeks to expand access to rights, services or livelihoods for the Muslim population will be sensitive, and may need to be slow. Pushing for significant social change in the short term is likely to either anger or entrench current positions.

Mitigation: Any provision to the Muslims must be matched by provision of equal support to isolated ethnic Rakhine communities. Appeal must be made to the best in Rakhine values, and they should be asked by their more respected or inspirational leaders to live up to their highest values.

3. *Pro-Rakhine bias*

Risk: GWM runs the opposite risk to most international agencies, of being accused of having a pro-Rakhine bias, of ignoring the human rights and needs of the Muslims, or of supporting and propagating a Rakhine nationalist agenda. This is more likely to be a problem with donors and other international agencies, particularly international human rights agencies, than with local Rakhine or with Burmese authorities.

Mitigation: Working primarily with the Rakhine, based on historic partner relationships, need not indicate any bias. Clear communication about aims and programming is required, together with significant training emphasis on empathy towards the Muslims, everyday peacebuilding from the Rakhine side towards the Muslims (including potential returnees from Bangladesh), and longer-term goals of social change within ethnic Rakhine communities are maintained. But note risk 2, above.

4. *Intra-communal conflict due to changed social power*

Risk: Gender, age and wealth inequalities are endemic in poor communities. While an aim of CDE is to reduce inequality, there is a risk that in the short to intermediate term, the concentrated training provided to the facilitator could dramatically increase their social power, and that of the committee and volunteers around them, creating new inequalities and intra-communal social tensions. Given that strong links are often demonstrated between intra-communal conflict as a precursor for inter-communal violence, this risk must be carefully monitored. This risk is particularly pertinent in relation to the empowerment of women potentially making them targets for domestic or intra-communal gender-based violence.

Mitigation: Ensure broad-based community participation in project decision-making. Train facilitators and committees to be able to critically examine all proposed projects, in terms of unearthing who benefits most and least, physically and socially, and engaging the more privileged in decision-making to assist the most disadvantaged. Facilitators and committees must gain critical awareness about privilege, intra-communal inequalities and power, and local needs. And detailed gender analysis must become a key part of all CDE programming and monitoring.

Mitigating risks of the conflict to CDE

We have identified four further risks, posed by the conflict towards the effectiveness of the CDE program. These are detailed below with a discussion of how to minimise each.

1. *Perceived bias—rejection of or animosity toward GWM*

Risk: There is a widespread perception by the Burmese military, government officials, Rakhine nationalists, and even many local ethnic Rakhine civil leaders and villagers members, that international agencies are heavily biased and partial. They believe that naively or through prejudice, international agencies promote the 'Rohingya' agenda at their expense. Very strong anti-foreign agency sentiment therefore exists in much of central and northern Rakhine.

There was little in the way of international presence in Rakhine prior to the 2012 violence. After 2012, most international agencies commenced work only or primarily with those displaced by the violence—who, as previously noted, were 86% Muslim. Furthermore, most non-Muslims were able to be repatriated to their original communities fairly quickly, while Muslims remained in internally displaced persons (IDPs) camps. Thus, the vast majority of assistance was delivered to the Muslim community, with little assistance rendered to the less-affected but still desperately poor Rakhine. This imbalance has been addressed since 2014, with most agencies directing equal amounts of funding to each community. However, added to this, international human rights campaigners and media reporting have strongly focussed on the treatment of the Muslims, sometimes saying or implying that the discrimination or military action is supported by ethnic Rakhine nationalists. Many Rakhine thus feel they are the forgotten victims of this conflict, existentially threatened by the Muslims, the Burmans and now the international community, while being blamed for the plight of the Muslims.

The government and international actors have failed to sufficiently explain the extent of the need for humanitarian programming to support the IDPs, and that this remains an ongoing need due to central Government decision-making and the difficulty resettling these people—not international agency bias. The Government-mandated model currently limits access of the Muslim IDP population to livelihoods and services, making them dependent on international agency support for survival.

The risk to GWM is that resentment towards international agencies could potentially target GWM too. This might come from more extreme nationalist groups, or just a groundswell across the community. Visits of foreign advisers and trainers could be targeted, or local partner organisations, their staff and other programs. Alternatively, local communities or partner organisations may reject further participation in the program, or government officials obstruct visits and programming.

Mitigation: Heavy reliance on local partners and facilitators chosen by communities, not GWM, mitigates this risk. Beyond this, GWM must maintain and further develop clear communication about the work being done, including on social media, and communicate how and why most programming is delivered to ethnic Rakhine villages, not Muslim communities or IDPs. GWM should also advocate more on behalf of the ethnic Rakhine, and clearly communicate responses to imbalanced international media and advocacy narratives.

2. *Escalation of conflict tension*

Risk: Conflict tensions remain high and the possibility of things beyond the control of local communities re-escalating conflict tensions around them remains high. Any new escalation in communal tensions anywhere in the state could spill over into violence in central Rakhine, and it would not take a lot for local violence to escalate. Traumatized populations are not ready to rebuild relations even with neighbours, nor accept returnees back (particularly if they are from ‘the Other’ group). Thus, even seemingly positive steps, such as quickly moving towards the return of displaced populations—even news of Muslims returning from Bangladesh—could seriously escalate tensions again. Without significant trauma recovery and new messaging, central Rakhine is not very resilient at the moment to any additional conflict tension.

Mitigation: Focus on dealing with past trauma, and reducing local tensions through ‘everyday peacebuilding’ (see below).

3. *Economic damage*

Risk: Conflict is perhaps the greatest inhibitor of development progress, and able to rapidly destroy previous substantial gains. Recent rounds of violence in northern Rakhine, while not physically taking place in the immediate vicinity of CDE communities in Mrauk-U and Kyauktaw, have nonetheless had significant impact on economic and social well-being. Village facilitators have reported that they have been unable to purchase essential goods, or only at exorbitant prices. They have been either unable to get to markets to sell produce, or when they do there are few buyers and the price they can get is deflated. Some communities have had groups of displaced people, often other Rakhine, travel through or seek shelter in their areas, placing further strain on limited resources. Thus, the conflict has set back the livelihoods and economic well-being of current CDE villages, and dented their morale around self-help. It has created a setback in their empowerment, and sense of agency to direct their own future.

There are several risks in this. A first is that gains in economic well-being already made through CDE may be, or may already have been, undone. A second is that without further support, both the empowerment/self-help principle and the improved well-being resulting from community projects may be lost. Despair and feelings of being overwhelmed by forces beyond themselves may take over, and future gains via the CDE process may be much harder to achieve. A third is that the cooperation built with government officials may be set back, harming local development progress.

Mitigation: Further investment is required into livelihoods, and quick local economic wins are essential to combat the economic impacts. Renewed emphasis on relationship building with and cooption of local officials, peaceful means of advocacy to government, etc is needed. There may also need to be more investment into local self-sustainability, as well as the redevelopment of local markets.

4. Social damage

Risk: The conflict has also exerted a terrible cost on Muslim-Buddhist and Rakhine-Burman relations. Villagers have seen a barrage of reports and rumours on social media, which have heightened anxieties, reified nationalist stereotypes and damaged relations with both nearby Muslim communities and Burmese officials, despite those parties in their areas not being directly involved. Everything they have heard has reinforced nationalist discourses. Local inter-communal trade and communication has reduced to almost nothing, trust almost extinguished and people have suffered secondary traumatisation. There have been widespread calls in central Rakhine for Buddhists to completely isolate the Muslims, which could have disastrous consequences. A loss of communication channels between the two communities means that in times of anxiety, even very minor incidents could quickly lead to widespread violence.

Mitigation: Investment is needed into work addressing trauma, helping communities distinguish between lies, rumour and fact (especially on social media), and rebuild lines of communication between Muslim and Buddhist communities—and between ethnic Rakhine villages and Burmese officials. Counter-messaging is required, and a track record of positive interactions. Communities must establish an ‘everyday peace’ by which they negotiate ways to interact that do not lead to violence.

Opportunities to engage in peacebuilding

The other half of conflict-sensitivity is not just mitigating risk, but actively enhancing the peacebuilding potential of components—or deliberately incorporating additional peacebuilding activities into programs. Below, we examine first the most apparent connectors, local capacities for peace and areas of shared public culture between the Muslim and Rakhine communities, then outline areas of opportunity or elements upon which GWM may build additional specific peacebuilding programming.

Connectors, local capacities for peace or shared public culture

Most attention in most conflict situations is given to analysis of what divides the parties, their grievances and conflicting claims. This is important, however examination what connects the parties, as discussed above, is more useful for peacebuilding. The current situation in Rakhine, as terrible as it is in so many ways, presents opportunities, not just challenges. Key is finding the right basis upon which to build programming, finding things in the local context with capacity to support and extend peace. This is difficult in Rakhine, where, being a deeply historical intractable conflict, the Muslim and Rakhine communities have lived largely in parallel existence for a long time, more than as integrated and interdependent communities. Shared history, values, activities, structure, etc. have therefore not often been extensive or deep. They have, and do, however, exist.

We identify several areas within which connectors, local capacities for peace and/or shared public culture reside, between the ethnic Rakhine and remaining Muslim villagers, in the target township areas. We have categorised these as follows:

1. Shared grievances

The Rakhine and Muslim communities actually share a lot of history, and many of the grievances emphasised in their rehearsals of historical narratives are very similar. Both sides sometimes attempt to downplay or alienate ‘the Other’ in the telling of this history, and there are historical grievances against one another. However, both Rakhine and Muslim communities passionately express very similar grievances towards the Burmans in their historical narratives. For both communities, these grievances date back to at least the conquering of Mrauk-U in 1784, and Burman attempts to obliterate their local cultural identity and history. Both sides tend to blame the Burman-led military and state for conflict in the region, more than one another, at least since Independence. Both groups widely believe military/state interventions in the state have invariably provoked communal tensions, rather than promoted social cohesion, and trace most violent episodes in the history of the state to interventions by the Burman-led military more than local causes. The contemporary grievance they share, expressed in their historical narratives, is a feeling that the Burman military/state act more like a colonial administration or occupying force, seeking to subdue, control and exploit while investing little into

local development and neglecting local needs. The underdevelopment, and government underinvestment in vital services like education, healthcare, markets and infrastructure, are passionate concerns on both sides. So too are the deep concerns that the military or government are selling off economic opportunities or resources to outside interests, either foreign or cronies, exploiting local resources for little or no return back to the people of the state. There exists, therefore, significant scope for a shared narrative to be developed, and used to extract the government assistance and attention the state deserves.

2. Existing engagement

While the Rakhine and Muslim communities have lived largely parallel existences, tending to minimise interaction, there have nonetheless been areas of significant engagement. Most of these, and the strongest both historically and now, are economic. Until 2012, the docks, markets and trade in Sittwe were highly interdependent, with all the associational life that surrounds this. While severed post-2012, a degree of economic interaction, even interdependence, continues around agriculture, labour, markets and trade across many parts of the state. There are few other areas of ongoing engagement between communities and villages, but economic need and opportunity, where it continues, offers perhaps the strongest basis for expanded peaceful interaction.

3. Shared needs & values

Rakhine and Muslim communities share many needs, some of which require work in both communities to maximise mutual benefit. In this discussion, we focus on strongly-felt local needs for which working with 'the other' group is most likely to be perceived to be fair and responsible, perhaps as the best way to maximise benefit to one's own community. These include disease prevention and health promotion, particularly of communicable disease, and thus that working with only one party would be detrimental while working across both communities would maximise benefit. Thus immunisation is a great opportunity, but also sanitation and hygiene work to minimise the spread of water-borne contamination and disease. A second area of great mutual benefit would be disaster preparedness, particularly around flooding, cyclone impact, and critical water and food shortages. Other areas around healthcare and education services are needs deeply felt by both communities, but a little harder to capitalise on in the short-term as being about maximising mutual benefit. Nonetheless, these are government responsibilities, and in the long-term both communities are mutually reliant on the government for their delivery. Shared advocacy and cooperation on these would be in the mutual interest. Less tangible, but equally shared, are values around the importance of their children having better opportunities than they have had, or the willingness to work hard for a living but with a desire for better returns and livelihoods, etc. These are pretty basic human values, and values both sides share. Perhaps ultimately, ways can be found to bring both communities together to work on these sorts of things.

4. Cultural exchange

In some conflict settings, and with the right conditions in place, it can be useful to utilise cultural exchange to create spaces around neutral activities through which parties can meet and learn about each other. Sporting activities, such as football clinics or matches, or music festivals, have been used successfully in other conflict settings, including in other parts of Myanmar. Facilitators have scaffolded other training and discussion opportunities onto these sporting activities or festivals, which allow participants to explore the nature of the conflict and experiment with new ways of cooperating across conflict lines. As they play together, they begin to see the other side of human beings with the same pastimes, and they learn to engage in a setting where clear rules and boundaries govern peaceful encounter. Likewise, other studies have shown that by participating in joint arts activities, feuding parties have had unhurried time to communicate and resolve longstanding issues, as well as to utilise artistic symbols and metaphors to distance themselves from sensitive issues in such a way as they can talk about these issues. Symbols and metaphors are also useful tools for allowing creativity and imagination to move communities towards new ways of solving old problems.

Elements upon which to build programming

Effective peacebuilding must address the drivers of conflict. Based on the above conflict analysis, risk analysis and examination of connectors, local capacities for peace or areas of shared public culture, the following offers a number of areas of potential opportunity, or elements of potential development programming that could be adopted to address key conflict drivers.

1. Provide impartial humanitarian aid to displaced communities, transitioning into long-term assistance

Most displaced Muslims have fled to Bangladesh, and are beyond GWM's reach and capabilities. Further, GWM's mission, mandate and expertise are in community development, not humanitarian assistance. However, ethnic Rakhine and other ethnic minorities have been displaced east and south, as have a few Muslims, and are accessible to GWM partners—so are the Muslims in IDP areas. Several local GWM partners have already been engaging in low-key humanitarian assistance within Rakhine. Notably, despite being ethnically Rakhine themselves, they have insisted on impartial distribution to Muslims and non-Muslims, and have already delivered some aid to displaced Muslims. Given the dominant Rakhine narrative is that the international community is partial and pro-Muslim, this is an opportunity to appeal to the best in Rakhine values and for themselves to act better than they perceive the international community to be. This alone makes it strategic for GWM to partner with these local agencies in delivering humanitarian assistance to displaced people within Rakhine, on an even-handed and impartial basis, and is an opportunity to reinforce very positive values within those partners and within the Rakhine communities being served.

Some non-Muslims have begun to return home, and the Myanmar government is taking something of a lead, but there are few agencies assisting these people and many of the villages they seek to return to have been burned or had crops spoilt, etc. These communities and individuals need long-term development support, around areas such as livelihoods, WaSH, healthcare, education—meaning initial material support provided to these communities could transition into longer-term CDE programming. GWM should therefore support local partners who are providing humanitarian aid, by raising additional funding, and should consider this work as a first step in building a long-term relationship with these communities as they return and rebuild, wherever possible. GWM should plan towards including these villages as a future cohort of CDE. These communities and individuals also need trauma recovery, to process their experience and contemplate non-violent responses, for which GWM's expertise in arts-based methodologies is ideally suited.

2. Counter Social media narratives

The significant role—and risk—of social media in spreading conflict narratives and mobilising people for violence, has already been noted. The role of Facebook, in particular, is serious enough that key UN figures have repeatedly raised this concern. For example, in March 2018 the outgoing UN Special Rapporteur for Human Rights in Myanmar, Yanghee Lee, blamed Facebook for, “inciting a lot of violence and a lot of hatred against the Rohingya and other ethnic minorities”.⁶⁹ Likewise, the chairman of the UN Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on Myanmar, Marzuki Darusman, said social media had played a “determining role” in Myanmar, describing how it has, “substantively contributed to the level of acrimony and dissension and conflict, if you will, within the public. Hate speech is certainly of course a part of that. As far as the Myanmar situation is concerned, social media is Facebook, and Facebook is social media”.⁷⁰ Facebook has been widely used for spreading conflict narratives via unverified but terrifying rumours, reframing minor incidents of crime or micro-violence (e.g. a rape, assault or commercial dispute) as part of bigger ethnic conflict narratives, and even the spread of fake accounts. Most conflict messaging circulates through this medium, but examination of messages about the conflict shows that a good deal of messages later prove to be completely fictitious.

One aspect of this is the recent explosion of internet access in Rakhine. Over the past 5 years, the proportion of the Rakhine population with access to mobile phones and internet has gone from a few

⁶⁹ Nicola Smith, ‘UN says Facebook helped fuel Rohingya ethnic cleansing’, *The Telegraph* (13 March 2018).

⁷⁰ Tom Miles, ‘UN investigators cite Facebook role in Myanmar crisis’, *Reuters* (13 March 2018)

percent to more than 70%.⁷¹ A population that still largely lacks access to electricity, clean water or healthcare, and has an average grade 4 education, is now on Facebook.

A counter-messaging strategy is required. Components would include both challenging fake news, lies and rumours about the conflict as they spread on Facebook, questioning whether incidents were just 'everyday' crime or issues rather than really acts of racial and religious hatred, and the generation of alternative narratives about more peaceful alternatives. Dissemination of the latter would need to be in forms that are likely to go viral, to be effective, something particularly difficult given the human propensity to be captured by extreme, negative headlines and news. Key to making this work would be conducting appropriate 'market research' to determine impact of various messaging, and building the IT skills and online networks to make this go viral

Significant support and training needs to be given to identifying and facilitating the right local social entrepreneurs to run this, from Yangon or Rakhine. There could also be very real dangers to individuals who put their names to this, something that must be carefully weighed and minimised. It is significant that many agencies are talking about the need for this, but few have any programs for doing so due to the dangers. There is also a danger that such people, once skilled, may change their views at any time if conflict tensions or violence escalated again, and join in the promotion of conflict narratives. However, and drawing on risk of the program #2 above, this will not be successful if it is felt to come from an international source as an attempt at engineering social change. Countering conflict narratives, and alternative narratives towards peace, must come from genuinely Rakhine actors.

Thus despite the dangers, it is noted that several key figures in partner organisations already either refrain from reposting any conflict narrative social media, or regularly raise questions and challenge aspects of stories going round. If GWM can identify these people, and provide targeted training and support, their effectiveness may be dramatically increased. The possibility may also exist to hire into GWM passionate social media advocates with the right values. Furthermore, GWM already has expertise in arts-based approaches, and creative expression including story, narrative, poetry, art, photography and music that are likely to be part of any successful social media strategy. GWM thus appears well-placed to engage in this space—although further investment into personnel and equipment will be required to generate higher quality outputs.

3. Train in critical thinking skills

One key aspect in being able to question the dominant narratives and discourse swamping community members on both sides, is the development of critical thinking skills. Learning to ask questions and deconstruct truths that are widely considered well-established or self-evident is an vital skill. This comes back to the need to empower community members and leaders to be able to critically evaluate their news sources, to be able to hold off judgement until more information is gained, and to be able to determine what has clear evidence, what is rumour, what is re-framing of a minor, everyday event—and able to listen to and calmly (even empathetically) evaluate contradictory or alternative perspectives, even if they have come from people considered enemies.

GWM should therefore focus on training CDE facilitators and committees in critical thinking skills, particularly around analysing social power relationships in community decision-making and proposed community-led projects in much greater detail. For example, there is need for greater deconstruction of the differential input into community project decision making by those disadvantaged by gender, age and social status, and deconstruction of who benefits most from projects and whose interests are being largely overlooked. This should be supplemented by helping support schools and teachers to develop critical thinking skills in the classroom. The end goal is helping communities develop a deeper critical awareness of the impact of conflict on all sides, the vested interests of key actors on all sides in pursuing conflict, and the alternatives they might pursue. A key milestone in achieving this would be for training CDE facilitators and committees, if not whole communities, to be able to listen to the historical narratives and deep existential fears of other conflict parties, and engage

⁷¹ Unpublished research by the Centre for Diversity and National Harmony (CDNH).

empathetically/positively with these alternative views and histories, deconstruct narratives and perspectives to arrive at new, more measured middle-ground views.

4. *Combat everyday intra-communal violence (particularly gender-based violence)*

Recent research has highlighted the fact that perpetrators of communal and armed violence (including those who turn to violent extremism), very often have a prior record of coercive behaviour or displays of everyday violence in other aspects of daily life—most commonly towards women and girls (threats or acts of gender-based violence), but also towards neighbours or even animals.⁷² In other words, the evidence suggests that the readiness to turn to violence as a solution often does not start at the inter-communal level, but manifests earlier within the family or at the intra-communal level. Furthermore, most perpetrators of violence are men, whether gender-based/domestic or inter-communal/armed violence, while as many if not more of the people attempting to prevent such violence are women. Thus, gender empowerment and equality at the village/family level is both a good in its own right, and a key conflict prevention strategy.

A prevention-focussed approach must commence by identifying everyday gender-specific warning signs, including both physical violence and other forms of domineering control or abuse. Violence towards neighbours and other community members is usually well known, but public censure in a village environment makes this form of violence less prevalent. On the other hand, most gender-based violence, domestic abuse and abuse towards animals is hidden, and often underestimated or denied by community leaders even when endemic—particularly by male leaders. Whether by denial or wilful ignorance, minimisation of the problem or rejecting it is occurring are the most common response. These domains, however, while difficult to identify and tackle, become essential to developing a violence prevention approach. Women's agency is essential. Gender methodologies specifically aimed at unearthing what is not said, what is hidden, are required. Men need to be sensitively included into programming, in ways that do not distort or restrict women's agency, yet avoids a sense they are all being collectively labelled and blamed. This is therefore an essential, yet specialist area requiring key staff with specific skill sets. It is strongly recommended GWM develop this line of programming across the CDE network.

Beyond addressing gender-based violence, domestic abuse and abuse of animals, GWM should also look at other ways to embed the values of non-violence and non-violent conflict resolution processes across all aspects of everyday community life. For example, discipline in schools and parenting is still very largely physical in Myanmar, modelling violence and force as a way to exert control. Working with teachers and parents to find effective non-violent alternatives is another important area of programming. So too is helping village committees develop defined and well-known community-level processes for non-violent dispute resolution. Devising and modelling such processes at the communal level makes it far easier to then also imagine and work towards inter-communal non-violent dispute resolution processes.

5. *Facilitate re-imagination of identities*

Given we analyse the Rakhine conflict to be primarily an 'identity' conflict, driven by heavily promoting ethno-nationalist or ethno-religious identities, resolution will require a re-imagination of identities. Understanding of the commonalities people have with those of the 'other' identity group, not just differences and grievances, and the endless differences amongst members of their ethnic group, is vital, as well as an understanding about the degree of choice they have in responding.

Ethnic nationalism promotes an idea of one's identity being primarily determined by membership of an ethnic group, one you are born into—thus one is 'Rakhine' or 'Bengali' or 'Rohingya' or 'Burman' before all else. The polarising narratives used to mobilise for conflict almost inevitably portray ethnic

⁷² See for example, Jacqui True and Sri Eddyono, *Preventing Violent Extremism: Gender Perspectives and Women's Roles* (Monash Centre for Gender, Peace and Security, Monash University 2017). Also note UN Security Council Resolution 1325 (2000) on *Women, Peace and Security*, and the 2002 report to the Security Council by UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan on *Women, Peace and Security*, and the ongoing work of the UN *Inter-Agency Task Force on Women, Peace and Security* (now a standing committee). With regards to violence towards animals as a precursor, see David Nibert, *Animal Rights/Human Rights: Entanglements of oppression and liberation* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2002).

identities as pre-eminent, fixed and rigid, the people as homogenous, and ethnic groups as having clear defined boundaries (the idea of being part-Rakhine, part-Rohingya, for example, is not contemplated, nor that one might have as much or more in common with someone from the other group as with your neighbour). Mobilising the group cohesion for ethnic conflict is easiest when there are clear enemies, as well as myths of a glorious past (narratives of superiority or the grandeur of a golden age to which they desire to return), myths of collective traumas (invasions, massacres, losses always covered with a strong sense of injustice), and clearly demarcated territory which can define the zones of inclusion and exclusion.

Re-imagination of such social identity requires safe and creative spaces. It must start with individuals, and within existing groups, before bringing conflict groups into dialogue. It needs to start by leading people to an awareness of the multiplicity of their individual identities, to the various age, gender, occupational, social, and other collectivities to which they may or do belong, and the way these also contribute to their social identities. And the way these collectivities could, or do, transcend the ethno-religious bounds. Re-imagination involves becoming aware of the diversity within their ethnic group, and the commonalities they share with other ethnicities, particularly those with which they have traditionally been in conflict. It thus involves changes in the way they see themselves and the way they see 'the other'.

GWM's expertise in training in and use of participatory arts, such as song writing, poetry and story-telling, to create the safe space for sensitive issues to be raised and confronted, positions the organisation with ability to lead in this space. Arts potentially allows people to reconnect over common interests and shared emotional experience, and reimagine the future, in ways that bypass some of the fears and preconceptions that intrude in rational discussion.

6. *Stabilise local relations and establish everyday peace between communities*

The townships in Rakhine in which Muslims continue to co-exist with Rakhine, particularly Kyauktaw, Mrauk-U, Ponnagyun, Rathedaung, Minbya, Myebon, Pauktaw and Sittwe, require stabilisation. The danger of violence being sparked by fear and rumour, even during simple everyday encounters, is very real. This is one key reason why the military have been so keen to maintain forced separation of the communities. However, the long-term presence of large number of security forces is dangerous, and the two communities have long been economically inter-dependent. Fears and animosities will always persist for decades after any violent conflict, but stabilisation on the ground and any hope for a more peaceful and prosperous future requires the communities to find non-violent ways of interacting.

Traditionally, most peacebuilding has been seen to revolve around elite discussions and negotiated accords. High-level peace negotiations are essential but cannot succeed on their own, and they do not alone change dynamics at the village level. Furthermore, the situation in Rakhine does not currently allow groups of Buddhists and Muslims to be brought together by non-state actors like GWM, for formal discussions, nor is there a formal peace process or political dialogue in place.

'Everyday peacebuilding' is the other half of the equation, and aims at helping communities find non-violent ways to interact. Everyday peace describes how members of groups with a history of conflict violence negotiate their daily activities so that when they encounter 'the Other' in everyday life, they avoid re-igniting violent responses. It is deliberately bottom-up, and initially about 'negative peace' (i.e. avoiding violence). It relies on intra-group discussions and careful planning of how to ensure incidental encounters between communities remain peaceful. It works to ensure the numerous everyday encounters with the other group remain peaceful, while hoping to increase the frequency and importance of small actions, encounters and activities between groups.

In the tripartite Rakhine conflict, there is need for such everyday peace to emerge in not only Rakhine-Muslim relations, but also Rakhine-military and Muslim-military. Given CDE only currently works in ethnic Rakhine villages, it can only directly facilitate the first two, but this is something that can and should be embedded into the core of CDE across these township, and ideally should be expanded to also work in Muslim communities as opportunity arises.

7. *Expand everyday peace into positive inter-communal encounters and activities*

Building on a foundation of negotiated and planned everyday peace, meaning avoiding violence in incidental encounters between community members, as above, the possibility emerges to slowly and carefully expand *positive* inter-communal encounters and activities. The aim is the re-connection of Muslim and Rakhine communities, allowing for mutual benefit and greater stability. The ultimate aim is that reconnection, and the slow rebuilding of trust, facilitates moderate voices and re-opens the sort of communication that might be able to de-escalate tensions and risk of violence when things happen, which they inevitably will. Building a track record of positive encounters with the military and government actors is also very important, although CDE is only currently well-placed to assist this with Rakhine-military/government encounters, note Muslim-military encounters.

Once the stabilisation of everyday peace has been planned and demonstrated (and only then) a growing trackrecord of peaceful re-engagement and trust-building with at least with particular individuals, would allow community-led CDE development projects to contemplate an inter-communal component. The types of project that would most suit this sort of an inter-communal engagement would be those that build upon remaining existing engagement, particularly around livelihoods, agriculture, economic and trade links, and around shared needs where there are additional benefits when work is conducted across both communities, such as disaster preparedness, disease prevention, immunisation, health promotion, water quality through good sanitation, et cetera. Likewise, in the right circumstances it can be beneficial to bring opposing groups together around 'neutral' activities in a fun environment, such as arts festivals and programs, or sports clinics and matches. The theory of change supporting such an approach is that by doing something fun together, they begin to see each other as human beings who enjoy the same pastimes, and that they can set aside conflict for a time and enjoy a mutual interest.

8. *Scale-up CDE as the basis for all the above practices*

Given recommendations 3-7 above all inherently rely on the community processes fostered by a CDE program already being in place, we recommend the urgent scale-up of CDE into a critical mass of villages across Kyauktaw, Mrauk-U, Ponnagyun, Rathedaung, Minbya, Myebon, Pauktaw and Sittwe townships, in particular. This scale-up must be very careful in site selection and the selection of facilitators, because in the same way that moderate role models is instrumental to achieving peace, failures could equally set back stabilisation and peacebuilding. A scaled-up CDE must very deliberately go beyond just facilitating community process to plan and lead local, bottom-up development projects, to expand into work on critical thinking, combatting intra-communal violence, re-imagination of identities, everyday peace and developing a track record of positive inter-communal encounter.

9. *Re-connect leaders and facilitate more formalised dialogue*

In addition to helping rebuild local, inter-communal connections, as above GWM should explore work with its local partner agencies to reconnect more moderate civil and political leaders, both Rakhine-Muslim and Rakhine-military/state. Before the latest violence, a wealth of positive connections existed between Rakhine and Muslim communities, particularly around economic and livelihood interaction, healthcare and education. There was even shared membership in community organisations and on committees in places like Sittwe. These are now largely broken, but a shared future will require someone, somehow, to help re-forge or strengthen such relationships.

GWM must find ways to these support local social entrepreneurs of peace, and attempt to quietly broker new connections. Given the restrictions on mobility, particularly for Muslim leaders, and the dangers posed to people being seen meeting together, cyberspace may be the safest space for such interaction. Perhaps an option would be a deliberate program reconnecting people and hosting discussions between leaders within carefully moderated WhatsApp groups? Regardless, this project should focus on re-connecting old friendships, or bringing new more-moderate leaders together, on a case-by-case basis and in small groups, in positive encounters and dialogue.

10. Facilitate critical engagement with history

Finally, the importance of history and historical narratives has been mentioned throughout this conflict analysis. Many international agencies and most *conflict-sensitivity* guidelines marginalise history, suggesting it is relatively unimportant compared to dealing with proximal issues and capacities for peace. The Kofi Annan-led *Rakhine Advisory Commission* took a similar approach. However, we argue for the importance of engaging actively with history for several reasons. Firstly, historical narratives are not actually primarily about history. History may be ancient, but the narratives exist and are continually created, updated and re-written in the present by contemporary actors. Their crafting and telling is intended to create diachronic links, by which a perspective on contemporary issues and a vision of the future is seen. Thus, the form used may be the telling of history, but the intended meaning being expressed is very contemporary. Secondly, history is the chosen medium by which many key figures from all three main groups express their ideas, often quite passionately. To ignore this is to appear either irrelevant or disrespectful. Thirdly, dealing with the contemporary grievances, issues, and fears will ultimately result in a different telling of history, so perhaps re-exploration of historical evidence and a critical engagement with history could potentially be one of the main ways for the protagonists to reconsider their claims, grievances and perception of threat. And finally, the ethnic Rakhine actually have a lot of shared history with Muslims, both with Muslims who lived in Rakhine and other Muslims from the wider Bengal region, so there is a lot of hope for history to be a source from which a new sense of a more shared identity might emerge.

We therefore recommend GWM both engage itself with history, as a sympathetic but critical outside organisation, but more, identify local moderates with a sense of history and facilitate both their deeper, more critical historical exploration, and their voice in communicating an alternative history.

Suggested citation:

Anthony Ware, Vicki-Ann Ware and Costas Laoutides, *Understanding & Responding to Conflict in Rakhine State: Conflict analysis & conflict sensitive strategic program advice for GraceWorks Myanmar, responding to the Rohingya–Rakhine–Burman conflict* (GraceWorks Myanmar, Melbourne and Yangon, 2018)

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Further detail in the conflict analysis, please see

Anthony Ware & Costas Laoutides, *Myanmar's 'Rohingya' Conflict* (Hurst, London & Oxford University Press, New York, 2018)

