# THE EFFECTS OF RELIGIOUS BASED CONFLICT ON REGIONAL SECURITY: THE CASE OF RAKHINE

# DİNİ TEMELLİ ÇATIŞMALARIN BÖLGESEL GÜVENLİĞE ETKİLERİ: ARAKAN ÖRNEĞİ

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**Abstract**

Due to the attacks led by the Buddhist monks, hundreds of Muslims
(Rohingyas) in the Arakan region of Myanmar lost their lives,
and an important part of them had to emigrate. The international
community has long remained silent, apart from a few weak reactions,
to the discrimination and violence that the Rohingya Muslims have
suffered. If the violence continues, this situation caused by Buddhist
religious radicals is likely to spread to India and Bangladesh and
turn into a regional conflict. The USA wants to use the conflicts
between India and China to surround China. The growth of these
conflicts will create difficult security problems in the region, as in

the Middle East. The main problematic of the study; the extent to which religious-based conflicts affect regional security.

**Keywords:** Radicalism, Conflict, Regional Security, Rakhine

**Öz**

Budist rahiplerin öncülük ettiği saldırılar nedeniyle Myanmar'ın Arakan bölgesindeki Müslümanların (Rohingyalar'ın) yüzlercesi yaşamını yitirmiş, önemli bir bölümü de göç etmek zorunda kalmışlardır. Uluslararası toplum uzun süreden beri Arakan Müslümanlarının maruz kaldığı ayrımcılık ve şiddete, birkaç cılız tepki dışında sessiz kalmıştır. Şiddetin devam etmesi halinde Budist dini radikallerin neden olduğu bu durumun Hindistan ve Bangladeş'e de sirayet ederek bölgesel bir çatışmaya dönüşebilmesi muhtemeldir. ABD, Çin'i çevreleme politikaları çerçevesinde Hindistan ile Çin arasında bulunan bölgede dini radikal unsurlardan kaynaklı çatışmaları kullanmak istemektedir. Bu çatışmaların büyümesi ise, Orta Doğu'da olduğu gibi, bölgede çözümü zor güvenlik sorunları meydana getirecektir. Çalışmanın temel sorunsalı; dini temelli çatışmaların bölgesel güvenliği ne düzeyde etkilediğidir.

**Anahtar Kavramlar:** Radikalizm, Çatışma, Bölgesel Güvenlik, Arakan

**INTRODUCTION**

The main cause of religious-based conflicts stems from religious radicalism. Religious radicalism; It is a type of radicalism that turns a belief system into a system critique through political arguments, plans to create a belief-based change in the existing one, resorts to violence and legitimizes it with religious arguments. While religious radicalism events are taking place in many parts of the world; one of these regions is Myanmar.

In Arakan, a region where Muslims live in Myanmar, Buddhist monks massacre the Muslim people and are forced to migrate, by themselves and by organizing the people, although one of the most important principles of Buddhism is not to kill. Although very few Muslims

live in Myanmar and the Muslim population does not pose a threat to the country, these attacks led by religious radicals cannot be prevented.

The main purpose of the study; It is a discussion of the effects of religious-based conflicts in Arakan on regional security. Work; It has been prepared based on the hypothesis that religious-based conflicts in Arakan threaten the security of the region. In the study, the concepts of religious radicalism and regional security were explained, brief introductory information about Myanmar was given, and the effects of religious-based conflicts in Arakan on regional security were discussed. Historical and descriptive research methods were used in the research. While preparing the research, the qualitative information processing method used in Social Sciences was taken as a basis.

### 1. Religious Radicalism and Regional Security

While radicalism underwent a dramatic change in just a century, in the 19th century it defined a non-violent and basically liberal, anticlerical, democratic political position like suffragette women; In the 20th century, it started to be used for an oppositional orientation that included anti-liberalism, fundamentalism, anti-democratic and reactionary agenda (Schmid, 2013, p.7). For this reason, radicalism, as a concept whose content cannot be agreed upon, has an ambiguous definition that stands between the exaggeration of beliefs (cognitive radicalism) and the extremism of behavior (behavioral radicalism), but at the most basic level, it refers to a process that occurs due to the extremism of people (Neuman, 2013, p.873-874). When extremism is defined as the deviation from the norms in its roughest form; radicalism refers to the development of ideologies and beliefs that deviate from the norms (Borum, 2011, p.9).

Religious radicalism, on the other hand, is a form of radicalism that transforms a belief system into a system critique through political arguments, plans to create a belief-based change in the existing one, and legitimizes the use of violence and/or force -whether or not the belief system suggests- with religious arguments (Arpacı, 2017, p.18). Similarly,

according to Rink and Sharma (2016, p.8), religious radicalism is the support of individuals to use violence to achieve religious-political goals within a certain period of time. In the European Commission's Report (2008, p.5-6), religious radicalism is defined as a set of various strategies that encompass political and reformist actions, cultural efforts, and the strengthening of missionary work across faiths. According to Brown (2013, p.341-342), academically religious radicalism explains Orthodox movements in terms of the conflict between tradition and modernity, when it refers to a traditionalist stance that effectively affirms the authority of traditional religious law and is opposed to innovations. On the other hand, "religious radicalism", which is used when referring to heterodox movements, defines a revolutionary religious stance that is daring, unconventional, tests the limits of religious law and can go beyond these limits from time to time.

Among the factors that cause radicalism, the most talked about is modernity. While transportation, urbanization and technology created by modernity emerge as facilitating preconditions in the context of situational factors, discrimination and social segregation in addition to urban poverty can be considered as situational preconditions that motivate radicalism. Under these conditions, the development of a sudden situation in which a direct response must be produced acts as an accelerator of radicalism. According to Veldhus and Staun (2009, p.3-58), the general factors that cause radicalization are relative deprivation, Western occupation and Western-supported oppressive regimes, identity problems, weak political and socio-economic integration, a sense of humiliation and other psychological factors. Radicalizing micro factors are weak integration, international relations, poverty, globalization and modernization. Based on this framework, operating in India; The National Liberation Front of Tripura (NLFT), which aims to establish an independent and Christian state in India, and The National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN) are called tiger militants, who are anti-Arab and anti-Muslim, founded by fanatical Christians, headquartered in Tel Aviv. The Guardians of the Cedars (GOC), called the Guardians of the Cedars (GOC), and the God's Resistance Army (LRA)

operating in Uganda can be cited as examples of religious radicalism and terrorism (Çelik, 2015, p.103).

The concept of security appears in every form of behavior that aims to "protect and maintain its existence", and therefore in every area of individual and social life. In order to be able to talk about the "security" phenomenon, which continues to be the basic dynamic of human life, there must be an internal and/or external threat or such perceptions and concerns for the protection and continuation of the existence. In international relations, no matter what perspective it is considered, when it is remembered that the concept of security started with the history of humanity, security is evaluated within this historical process and the content of the concept enriches and develops depending on time and conditions (Dedeoğlu, 2003, p.13-14).

British academician Barry Buzan's Regional Security Complex Theory has an important place in constructivist international relations theory. Buzan's theory basically developed an important alternative to the new system perception put forward by Samuel Huntington in his book The Clash of Civilizations. According to Buzan, new conflicts or alliances of the international system will take place not on the axis of global cultural, religious and civilizational (eg Islam, West, Asia, etc.) divisions, but in sub-systems formed by regions. The basic idea is that real threats are more effective at geographically close distances (regions), increasing security interdependence on a regional scale. Accordingly, security dependencies are more intense among the actors within the regional structures than those outside them. That is, regional security structures are security dilemmas concentrated in certain geographical areas (regions). Threat perceptions of states (or other actors) in these regions are directly related to each other and create security dependency; the security of a state becomes inseparable from the security of other countries in the region.

Buzan stated that there are two basic elements of regional security dependency; balance of power and historical perceptions of friendship-hostility among states in a particular geographical region. The balance of

power is a geopolitical phenomenon that brings states (or other actors) in a region closer or apart. However, the determining factor in interstate relations is not Huntington's civilization-based distinction, but rather the distribution of power (military, political, social and environmental, etc.) arising from more real, actual security practices. According to Buzan, regions are sub-systems in which geographical proximity and similar security perceptions and applications create a balance of power. Regions are units that can think and act jointly in their savings and preferences regarding security, and therefore their security perceptions cannot be considered separately from each other. These regions are not artificially produced units as ideas, but are elements that are already in intense communication and interaction in terms of security; the formation of the region is a natural result of the interaction between the actors (Şir, 2018, p.347). In other words, regional security structures should not be seen as a result of existing communication and dependency, regional power balances, not artificially constructed (constructed) security perceptions at the level of discourse and perceptually.

Another link between territoriality and security concerns the regional consequences of local conflicts. These depend on the nature of the security complex and the horizontal and vertical correlation of various security problems in certain areas, the rates of which can be highly variable. A third link is between the conflict management role of the organized region (if any) and inner region security or "regional order" and the closest environment (for example, the EU's neighborhood policies) and the world order (which means being an actor with a power to shape the world order). case applies). The management of conflicts outside the region but in the immediate vicinity can either be aimed at a sudden and severe conflict or to transform the situation in a preventive way. In both cases, stabilization or integration (expansion of the regional organization) can be used (Hetne, 2018, p.90).

Religious radicalism is a type of radicalism that transforms a belief system into a system criticism through political arguments and plans to create a belief-based change in the existing one. With the

instrumentalization of the belief system, it can cause violence, war and even genocide. In other words, it is supporting the use of violence to achieve religious-political goals. Countries or terrorist organizations can use religious radicalism as a tool to achieve their goals. If there are groups of different faiths in a region, a conflict that takes place anywhere in the region can become widespread and pose a serious threat to regional security.

### 2. General Information About Arakan

Myanmar is a country in the southeast of the Asian continent with an area of 676,578 square kilometers, surrounded by medium-sized India, Bangladesh, Laos and Thailand, and has a strategic importance in terms of energy transfer and international trade, and has a coast to the Bay of Bengal and the Andaman Sea (Tüysüzoglu, 2012, p.2). The name of the country, previously known as Burma/Burmese, was changed to the Republic of the Union of Myanmar in 1989. Both names (Burma and Myanmar) characterize the Bamar ethnic group. Although there are 135 different ethnic groups in the country with a population of 55 million, 68 percent of the population consists of Bamarians. Shans, Karens, Rakhines, Rohingyas, Chinese, Mons, Kachis, Cains, Kayas and Indians are other important ethnic groups in the country. According to official data, 89% of the population is Buddhist, 4% is Christian, 4% is Muslim and 1% is Hinduist. Muslims are concentrated in the Arakan mountain region adjacent to the southeast of Bangladesh (Bayram & Yaylar, 2016).

Although Arakan is in a region located in the west of Myanmar, the Arakan geography is called "Rohingya" in the local language and the Arakan people are called "Rohingya people". It is a modified form of the Rohingya name 'Raham', which means 'Blessing', 'Don't have mercy'. In addition, it is claimed that Rohingya means "the place whose soul is liberated". Rohingya Muslims used this expression while burying their dead in the past, and this tradition, which has become common among Rohingya Muslims over time, still continues today (Ateş, 2017, p.175). On the other hand, it should be noted that not only Rohingya

Muslims live in Myanmar, but also other Muslims. Besides Muslims, the Buddhist people living in Arakan are called "Raxine" (Rakhine). "Rohingya" and "Raxine" express not only an ethnic but also a religious separation. However, Buddhists, of whom Myanmar people and Rakhines make up a large part, sometimes use the expression "Kalar", which is a contemptuous expression in Bengali, instead of addressing Rohingyas as "Rohingya" (Kipgen, 2013).

Looking at the historical background of Myanmar, it is known that the region got its independence from England in 1948. The region has made a name for itself with its unstable political structure and political tensions since the day it was founded. The military administration, which has had a say in the administration of the country since 1962, did not let the minorities in the country and its citizens demanding their rights breathe. The junta named "State Law and Order Restoration Council", which took over the administration with a bloody coup in 1988, changed form in 1997 by taking the name "State Peace and Development Council". During the junta period, the search for freedom and democracy of Myanmar Muslims, especially the Rohingya, was suppressed. Despite these pressures, Aung San Sun Kyi was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1991 for her "non-violent struggle for democracy and human rights." Although he is concerned about democracy, he is still an activist who has made his voice heard in the name of democracy (Akhanda, 2013, p.150-70).

Rakhine (Arakan) region, which was occupied by England and Japan respectively, was a region that had its own sultanate until the 1700s, but was occupied by Myanmar in 1784 and came under Myanmar administration. XIX in the region. It is known that there were many uprisings against the British occupations in the century. This is the first piece of land captured by the British with the Anglo-Burmese War in 1826. II. During World War II, Japan was given permission to establish an autonomous force and its own army - the Arakan Defense Force - in the Rakhine region, which was under its occupation. At the beginning of 1945, the Arakan Defense Force took the side of the Allied Powers and

fought against the Japanese (Yunus, 2012, p.81-82). After the Panglong Conference in 1948, all 3 regions were included in the newly established Union of Myanmar, and although efforts were made to leave the union in the 1950s, they failed.

The fate of the Rohingya people in the Rakhine region has completely changed with the occupation. In the light of historical data, the parliamentary government that ruled the country after the independence of Myanmar from 1948 to 1950 and from 1960 to 1962; Kachin, Kayah, Karen, Mon, Rakhin and Shan ethnic groups as an ethnic group. However, after 1962, the military administration jeopardized the existence of Muslims in the region and claimed that this group was not indigenous. Although many works have been written explaining that the Rohingya Muslims, who have been fighting for independence at various times in history, are indigenous and have been in that region for thousands of years, the Myanmar government has published publications to reject all these and published books containing these claims in countries such as the USA, Japan and Bangladesh (Arakan Report, 2017, p.7).

According to a Human Rights Watch (2012) report, a few years after they forcibly deported the Rohingya to Bangladesh in 1978, Burma's Citizenship Law of 1982 was promulgated and was specifically designed to deny Rohingya citizenship. If a person is to be considered a Rohingya citizen, the law has been enacted that he has to prove that his ancestry resided in Myanmar before 1823, the year before the British government sent Muslims to Arakan. This law established three categories of citizenship: citizenship, auxiliary citizenship and citizenship subject to own nationality. Citizenship is granted to persons belonging to one of the national races such as Kachin, Kayah, Karen, Karen, Chinese, Burman, Mon, Rakhine, Shan, Kaman or Zerbadee. Citizenship was not granted to those who did not prove that their ancestors had settled in Myanmar before 1823. Assistant citizenship status is granted if his or her grandparents or ancestors before 1823 were citizens of another country. Citizenship subject to naturalization is granted only to those who have at least one parent with such Burmese citizenship or who can

prove that their family entered and resided in Burma before its inde-
pendence in 1948 (Yunus, 2012, p.83). However, over time, these laws
have been changed and made qualified.

### 3. The Effects of the Conflicts in Arakan on Regional Security

The Rohingya issue arose in the years before Burma's independence,
and during the Second World War the local Arakan society was split
in two. While Buddhist Rohingya ally with the nationalist and anti-co-
lonial party supported by Japanese forces; Rohingya Muslims received
support from the British. Thus, as a result of political discrimination,
the fragile relationship between these two groups deteriorated during the
war. Even when the war ended, the problems did not leave both sides;
During the Second World War, the main powers (British and Japanese)
fighting each other in Burma signed a peace agreement and remained
neutral (Universitadella Calabria, 2013/2014). On the other hand, it is
known that the Muslim population in the Rakhine state consists mostly
of Bengali immigrants from East Pakistan and present-day Bangladesh,
and some Indians migrated during the British period. This theory is
based on the fact that they cannot become full-fledged Bengali illegal
immigrants as they speak mostly the 'Chitagong dialect' which is strong
in Bengali and left Bangladesh in the years before 1971 (Ahmad, 2010).

Immediately after declaring Buddhism as the official religion of
Myanmar, the government took some special measures to kill many
Muslim officers and appoint Buddhists in their place. Great efforts have
been made to move Buddhists from their central cities in Myanmar to
Arakan to reduce the Muslim majority. Thus, the freedom of movement
of the Rohingya was severely restricted and most of them were stripped
of their Burmese citizenship. They were also subject to a two-child limit.
It is also claimed that the Rohingya continue to be employed as forced
laborers in road construction works and in military camps (Islam, 2012).

As a matter of fact, the roots of the mujahideen movements that started
in 1947 in Arakan are traced back to the Second World War in 1942. It
is based on the slaughter of approximately 5,000 Muslim Arakanese by

Buddhists in Minakya and Mrauk-U districts during World War II. It is known that this incident of violence took place because the Japanese invaded the region and created a buffer zone after the withdrawal of the armed Muslim groups under British auspices in the north of Arakan (Akhanda, 2013). While these events were developing, in 1946 the Rohingya Muslims asked the Pakistani leader Muhammad Ali Jinnah for help in connecting their regions to Pakistan. Two months later, the Northern Arakan Muslim League was established and they demanded a separate administration from the Burmese government. However, the Burmese administration refused this request and the Rohingya Muslims declared war upon it (Yunus, 2010, p.84).

Researcher Anand (1978) describes the initial refugee problem as follows: "Over 200,000 refugees from Burma crossed into Bangladesh over the course of two months. The majority were in about 300 tent camps at the border. They said that the Burmese authority came to the Arakan region because of their persecution, torture, harassment and extremism against the Muslim inhabitants. It was also reported that when refugees wanted to flee, they were subjected to different atrocities by Burmese army and immigration officials, and that the same authorities deliberately evacuated the Muslim minority in Arakan. The Bangladesh government also held a strong protest against the thesis that 'Repressive measures caused the forced withdrawal of its citizens (ethnic and religious minorities)' and Ziaur Rahmanda (former Bangladesh Prime Minister) announced to the world public the inhumane evacuation of Myanmar Muslim citizens.

Contrary to the claims of both the fleeing Muslims and the Bangladeshi government, the Burmese government claimed that the Muslims were not its citizens. According to Anand's article, the Burmese government's response was as follows:

"......*Refugees are actually illegal immigrants or fugitives from the law (Citizens Law). The so-called refugees have been cited as Bangladeshi nationals illegally settled on the Burmese border. According to the official Burma News Agency (NAB), "Bengalis wanted to flee due to lack of entry*

*registration documents as well as lack of identity cards. After a review process called the 'Nagamani' (citizenship review code) code, the area began to be evacuated from March 17, 1977 to separate the residents from those who are full citizens and those with foreign status"* (Anand, 1978).

Aggressive thoughts are harmful to all Buddhist teachings. Chief among the moral principles taught to Buddhist monks is the principle of not killing. So why do Buddhist monks make provocative speeches against Muslims and even personally participate in the killings of dozens? There is a strange situation here. Because in two countries in Asia (Srilanka and Myanmar), Islam is not threatened. In the two countries, Muslims, a small minority, generally take a peaceful stance. The event that triggered the events in Sri Lanka was the halal slaughter debate and a group called Buddhist Brigade under the leadership of the Priests organized rallies against it. There have been calls for direct actions and boycotts of Muslim businesses. There were no casualties among Muslims during the events in Sri Lanka (NTV, 2013). However, a much more serious picture emerged in Myanmar, with the government's support and encouragement in some activities.

It is noteworthy that the attacks against Muslims in Myanmar were provoked by a Buddhist monk named Ashin Wirathu. This priest, who was imprisoned in 2003 for inciting religious hatred, calls himself "Buddhist bin Laden". Buddhist monks such as Wrirathu are also supported and patronized by the rulers, as they are seen as a strong constitutional element in the eyes of the people. Throughout its history, Myanmar leaders have justified all kinds of violence in the name of Buddhism and made Buddhism one of the basic elements of their national identity. In this direction, anti-Muslim views began to find a response among some segments of the people. Despite their majority, many Buddhists feel that their religion and national unity are under threat. While establishing a link between violence all over the world and Islam, Buddhists are probably of the opinion that they "should not be left behind" in this conjuncture (Bayram & Yaylar, 2016). This means that Buddhism, which is

thought to be based on pacifist teachings, has been transformed into a religion that justifies acts of violence.

These pacifist Buddhist Priests (who clad in saffron robes) are a highly respected group of people, mainly the military. During a two-day demonstration that began in Mandalay on 2 September 2015, thousands of people, including the monk order, had the support of former Prime Minister Thein Sein. Here, a proposal to resettle Rohingya to third world countries (except Bangladesh and Myanmar) is presented. The High Priest urged his citizens to come to the rescue by supporting the president. Moreover, on October 15, 2015, thousands of Buddhist monks marched towards Yangon and Mandalay, the country's two largest cities, to hold protests against the OIC (Organization of Islamic Cooperation) plan to open a liaison office. The following statements are on the banners of these protesters: They said that they would continue their demonstrations until "OIC quit" and "No OIC" and unless the government accepts their demands, that is, they do not allow OIC to take office. Priests accused the OIC of working only as an agent for the Rohingya. A few hours after the dispersal of the priests, Thein Sein's office made a statement that the OIC would not be allowed to take office because the public was against it (Kipgen, 2013). It is unclear whether the statement was prepared in response to the protest or in advance.

The Myanmar army launched an operation against the Rohingya Muslim minority after the attack on some police stations by armed militants in the region, and hundreds of thousands of civilians were forced to leave their homes. More than 700,000 Rohingya Muslims fled the violence. Rohingya Muslims said that the army and armed groups raped and tortured them. Journalists who went to the region also documented that some villages were burned. The United Nations declared that what the Myanmar army did was "a typical example of ethnic cleansing". Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) organization announced that more than 6,700 Rohingya Muslims, including at least 730 children, were killed in just the first month of the army attacks; Amnesty International also said that the top commanders of the Myanmar Army should be tried for

crimes against humanity due to what was done to the Rohingya Muslims. On the other hand, the Myanmar army claimed that it only fought the Rohingya Liberation Army and did not target civilians (BBC, 2018).

In its rivalry with China, the USA wants to destabilize Myanmar through Arakan and thus limit its main rival in the global struggle. In this context, the claim that the Rohingya Liberation Army was financed by Washington and Riyadh in order to break Beijing's influence in the country is extremely important. Because from this claim, it is understood that the USA supports jihadist groups in Afghanistan against the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) and tries to terrorize Rohingya Muslims by radicalizing them against China (Ankasam, 2018). Therefore, it is possible to say that the latest conflicts in Arakan are caused by the global rivalry between the USA and China. According to this view, which is compatible with the general policies of the USA, the USA wants to destabilize the region by creating a security problem in the region and supporting regional conflicts. The USA is trying to reach its goal by using radical religious elements in the Middle East as well. The onset of a Muslim-Christian conflict in this region, which is sandwiched between India and China, will cause a security problem in the region and will legitimize the intervention of the US and global organizations in the region. As a result of this, the USA will have achieved some more success in its policies to contain China.

**CONCLUSION**

Religious radicalism is a type of radicalism that turns a belief system into a system critique through political arguments and plans to create a belief-based change in the existing one. The instrumentalization of the belief system can lead to violence, war, and even genocide. In other words, it is supporting the use of violence to achieve religious-political goals. Countries or terrorist organizations can use religious radicalism as a tool to achieve their goals. If there are groups of different faiths in a region, a conflict that takes place anywhere in the region can become widespread and pose a serious threat to regional security.

Hundreds of people lost their lives due to the attacks led by Muslims, Rohingyas, and Buddhist monks in the Arakan region of Myanmar, and an important part of them had to emigrate. If the violence continues, this situation caused by Buddhist religious radicals is likely to turn into a regional conflict.

The USA wants to destabilize the region by using religious radical elements in the region between India and China within the framework of its policies to contain China. A security crisis that may arise in the region will cause a security problem and will legitimize the intervention of the US and global organizations in the region. As a result of foreign intervention, it is possible that religious-based conflicts in the region will spill over from Myanmar and affect countries such as Bangladesh and India. Therefore, this situation confirms the hypothesis of the study that "religious-based conflicts in Arakan threaten the security of the region".

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