

## **Refugees' Presence in Malaysia: Unravelling its Pull Factors**

*Kehadiran Pelarian di Malaysia: Membongkar Faktor Penarik*

Emyzai Zainuddin<sup>1</sup> & Atika Shafinaz Nazri<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Kementerian Sumber Manusia, Putrajaya

<sup>2</sup>Institute of Ethnic Studies (KITA), National University of Malaysia (UKM)

atikshafinaz@ukm.edu.my  
emyzai.hazrulnyezam@gmail.com

### **ABSTRACT**

*The research explores the demographics of refugees in Malaysia, highlighting their numbers, origins, and distribution across different states. The study identifies four key pull factors influencing refugees' choice of Malaysia as a destination: geographical, social networks, visa exemption policies, and the freedom of religion. Geographical proximity plays a significant role, as refugees choose nearby countries when fleeing conflicts. Social networks within refugee communities provide crucial information and support, reducing costs and risks associated with migration. Malaysia's visa exemption policy has made it accessible to refugees, allowing them to enter the country without visas. Additionally, the freedom to practice Islam in Malaysia attracts numerous Islamic refugees. To wrap it up, we argue, that addressing the needs and challenges of refugees in Malaysia requires a comprehensive and context-specific approach that takes these factors into account.*

*Keywords: pull factors; refugees; refugees in Malaysia; UNHCR.*

### **ABSTRAK**

*Penyelidikan ini meneroka demografi pelarian di Malaysia, menonjolkan bilangan, asal usul dan pengedaran mereka di seluruh negeri yang berbeza. Kajian ini mengenal pasti empat faktor tarikan utama yang mempengaruhi pilihan pelarian ke Malaysia sebagai destinasi: kedekatan geografi, rangkaian sosial, dasar pengecualian visa, dan kebebasan beragama. Kedekatan geografi memainkan peranan penting kerana pelarian cenderung memilih negara berdekatan apabila melarikan diri dari konflik. Rangkaian sosial dalam komuniti pelarian menyediakan maklumat dan sokongan penting, mengurangkan kos dan risiko yang berkaitan dengan penghijrahan. Dasar pengecualian visa Malaysia telah menjadikannya mudah diakses oleh pelarian, membolehkan mereka memasuki negara ini tanpa visa. Selain itu, kebebasan untuk mengamalkan Islam di Malaysia menarik sejumlah besar pelarian Islam. Konklusinya, kami berpendapat, menangani keperluan dan cabaran pelarian di Malaysia memerlukan pendekatan komprehensif dan khusus konteks yang mengambil kira faktor-faktor ini.*

*Kata kunci: faktor penarik; pelarian; pelarian di Malaysia; UNHCR.*

## INTRODUCTION

The number of global refugees over the past three years increases steadily, commencing from 2017 and extending through 2019. In 2017, the global refugee population stood at 25.4 million individuals, which subsequently increased to 25.9 million in 2018, constituting a 2% rise equivalent to 500,000 people (UNHCR 2017). Furthermore, in 2019, the global refugee count reached 26 million individuals, reflecting a marginal increase of 0.4% or 100,000 people compared to the preceding year (UNHCR 2018a; UNHCR 2019a). If the refugee population of 2019 were to be considered as a nation, it would rank 50th in terms of global population size (World Population Review 2019). Referring to the global refugee population as of December 2019, Syrian refugees constitute the largest group, numbering 6.6 million, followed by Venezuela with 3.7 million, Afghanistan with 2.7 million, South Sudan with 2.2 million, Myanmar with 1.1 million, and others (UNHCR 2019a). Turkey, on the other hand, has become the top destination country for refugees worldwide, hosting 3.6 million individuals for five consecutive years. The increase in the number of refugees, resulting from humanitarian crises across the globe, is of great concern, especially when human rights, both individual and collective, are denied due to government policies that do not recognize them as refugees or lack specific mechanisms to manage their presence (Mohd Nur Hidayat & Ibrahim 2017).

The issue of refugees is indeed a global concern that affects nearly all continents due to cross-border migration. In 2018, the number of refugees in the Asia-Pacific region reached 4.37 million (UNHCR 2018a). The refugee crisis in Southeast Asia, a subcontinent of Asia, has shown an increasing trend, particularly involving the Rohingya ethnic group due to persecution by the Myanmar regime (UNHCR 2019b). This situation indirectly impacts the demographics of refugees in the region, especially since only three countries in Southeast Asia are signatories to the United Nations Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees of 1951 (hereafter referred to as the Refugee Convention of 1951) and the Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees of 1967. These countries are the Philippines, Timor-Leste, and Cambodia. Most other countries in Southeast Asia have not ratified the Refugee Convention of 1951 (UNHCR 2020a).

Hitherto, the Malaysian government, on humanitarian grounds, has granted permission to Undocumented Foreigners (PATI) holding UNHCR cards to temporarily reside in the country before being resettled in a third country by UNHCR (Katrina 2018). Malaysia's open stance in this regard has created opportunities for a greater number of refugees to enter the country, driven by various other factors such as economic prospects, employment opportunities, stability, security, and protection (Intan Suria Hamzah, Sity Daud & Nor Azizan Idris 2016). Refugee entry could be either temporary or permanent, depending on the situation in their country of origin.

Every year, the number of individuals becoming refugees due to political turmoil or natural disasters continues to rise, to the extent that its direct impact is felt by the host countries. However, in Malaysia, despite the increasing annual influx of refugees across its borders, the government maintains its stance of refraining from formal management of their status. Meanwhile, the daily lives of refugees in Malaysia are persistently marred by obstacles that threaten their security in various aspects; which could be traced based on the statement made by Richard Towle, who at that time served as the UNHCR representative in Malaysia, during

his address at the International Conference on Rohingya (March 14-16, 2017) held at the Marriott Hotel in Putrajaya, Malaysia. He highlighted the difficulties faced by Rohingya refugees in Malaysia, stating that "...they have limited access to basic services, including the right to work, essential health, and education services. Many are at risk of exploitation, and detention..." (Towle 2017). The prevailing threat situation has exposed many to the risk of human exploitation and detention. Meanwhile, the Harian Metro (2017) recounted the tumultuous life experienced as a refugee by Najeela Karimi, a 22-year-old Afghan national, who fled to Malaysia and acknowledged living in a state of isolation without assistance from known individuals.

Kermeliotis (2019) reported on the challenges faced by Yemeni refugees living in the vicinity of Kuala Lumpur. Based on a 5:06-minute news coverage, it depicted the life of Mahmoud, a refugee who is compelled to work to sustain his livelihood, despite being exposed to legal actions by the authorities. The video also highlighted the difficulties faced by his children in accessing education in Malaysia. More recently, Daniel (2020) reported through the East Asia Forum on the complexity of the situation faced by refugees as a result of the implementation of the Movement Control Order (PKP) due to the spread of the Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic in Malaysia. Most of them work in informal, daily or weekly wage jobs, making them heavily reliant on assistance from Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) and contributions from the wider community.

Apparently, even though refugees have successfully fled their home country's conflict, the normative narratives of this group are not as straightforward as one might assume. Andika & Aizat (2020) assert that refugees constitute the most vulnerable group, easily exposed to insecurity and discriminatory treatment due to the absence of specific mechanisms to ensure their rights to access justice. Hence, our research endeavors to unravel the pull factors that attract refugees to choose Malaysia as a destination, whether for permanent or temporary settlement, despite the country's non-signatory status to the 1951 Refugee Convention and numerous challenges in life need to be confronted here.

### **AT A GLANCE THE CIRCUMSTANCE OF REFUGEES IN MALAYSIA**

The push factors refugees to leave their home country due to conflicts have been a compelling driver. This argument is substantiated through the study conducted by Syahrul Alim Baharuddin and Azlizan Mat Enh (2018), which identified that the factors pushing Vietnamese refugees to Malaysia are primarily attributed to the political, economic, and social instability in Vietnam, compelling their citizens to flee their homeland in search of protection in Malaysia. However, Malaysia's open stance in welcoming the influx of refugees into the country does not guarantee their sustainability here, although refugees are entitled to protection either in transit or destination countries. According to Suzarika Sahak, Rohaida Nordin, and Ma Kalthum (2020), a transit country is the first hope for refugees. Nonetheless, refugees frequently experience a lack of assurance regarding their safety while residing in a transit as well as the fates and stories sometimes go unheard. Transit countries play a significant role in safeguarding these refugees, not exclusively because of their obligations under international law or their duties as members of the international community, but also out of a commitment to humanitarian policies.

Meanwhile, the study by Atika Shafinaz, Kartini Aboo Talib, and Nidzam Sulaiman (2019) untangled that the survival of Syrian refugees in Malaysia is often jeopardized, resulting in significant impacts on their personal, political, economic, community, and social safety. Despite successfully escaping the conflicts in their home country, they remain exposed to greater challenges, especially if the transit country has not ratified the 1951 Refugee Convention. Therefore, the researchers have proposed that the Malaysian government develop a specific action plan to address the issues surrounding refugees in the country. The involvement of NGOs is also essential, particularly in terms of complaint mechanisms and psychiatric assistance, in addition to providing food, healthcare, and education assistance.

In addition to their basic human rights, refugees also have the right to establish familial institutions, which, however, are impeded due to their status conflicting with prevailing laws. Research conducted by Intan Nadia, Haliza, and Hasnizam Hashim (2019) regarding the issue of marriage among Islamic refugees or with local citizens has arisen due to the absence of valid identity documents, thus obstructing the marriage process. The study recommended that the Malaysian government establish guidelines or regulations regarding marriage among Islamic refugees to prevent invalid marriages from occurring.

The discussion by Mohd Nur Hidayat and Ibrahim (2017) delved into various dimensions of refugee rights from an Islamic perspective. They examined the interplay between the implementation of rights and protection provided to Muslim Filipino refugees in Sabah, focusing on asylum protection, non-refoulement rights, non-discrimination rights, and the educational rights of refugee children in Malaysia. The study revealed that both Malaysian legislation and Islamic Sharia laws exhibited ambiguity and fell short of aligning with international legal benchmarks and Islamic Sharia standards.

On the other hand, the research conducted by Andika and Aizat Khairi (2020) analyzed disparities in legal assistance that disproportionately favor Malaysian citizens over refugees, despite the latter being the more vulnerable group. Referring to the failure of social institutions, particularly legal aid providers, to provide adequate access to legal assistance for refugees, it underscores the existence of inequality within the modern social justice system in Malaysia.

Therefore, to ensure the protection of refugee rights without compromising the sovereignty and security of the receiving state, it is necessary to establish a more efficient management mechanism. The study conducted by Ahmad, Abdul Rahman, and Mohamed (2017) in their article titled "The Role of Non-Signatory State to the 1951 Refugee Convention: The Malaysia Experience" examined the status of refugees in Malaysia as a country that has not signed the 1951 Refugee Convention and the 1967 Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees. Through this article, the authors proposed mechanisms that Malaysia could adapt to protect refugees without affecting its sovereignty. Among the authors' recommendations is to foster cooperation among Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) countries in addressing humanitarian crises, including suggesting that the Malaysian government enact specific laws and institutional frameworks to address refugee issues in Malaysia.

Based on the above discussion, we assert that the safety of refugees is often jeopardized, involving various components within human security. Furthermore, the failure of laws to protect the rights of refugees from discrimination exacerbates the already difficult situation faced by refugees. Nevertheless, the influx of this vulnerable group into Malaysia from abroad continues to increase. Therefore, this study aims to investigate the factors that

attract refugees to seek asylum in Malaysia, despite residing in this country making their lives difficult.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study focuses on refugees in Malaysia as a case study to identify the motivating factors that drive them to seek asylum in Malaysia. Through a qualitative approach that refers to research that provides descriptions, interpretations, or meanings in a given communicative process, we analyze individuals or groups related to their experiences and life histories.

Our study successfully conducted interviews with a total of ten participants, comprising a former minister, a national security council official, seven refugees, and a school director providing education to refugee children. The interviewed refugees represented diverse backgrounds, including Rohingya, Chin, Syria, and Somalia (see details at Table 1).

Interviews are defined as two-way conversations through face-to-face or remote interactions between the interviewer and informants, with the purpose of gathering research information. study employed a semi-structured interview approach; more flexible type of conversation, allowing the researcher to delve deeper into the studied information. This method also enables the researcher to investigate and expand on interviewee responses; any questions or uncertainties that arise during the interview can be clarified directly by the informant.

Through the semi-structured interviews, the researcher had a list of topic-specific questions to serve as interview guides, providing informants with flexibility in their responses. The researcher also had the opportunity to pose additional questions that were not included in the question guide. Questions were pre-framed before the interview process, based on the research issues and objectives. However, the findings from officer at the national security council were obtained solely through email correspondence due to time constraints.

TABLE 1. The details of the informants

Informant	Organization/Individual	Date	Place
Informant 1	Former Minister/ former OIC Special Ambassador to Myanmar	26 February 2020	Bukit Damansara, Kuala Lumpur
Informant 2	National Security Council, Malaysia	27 March 2020	Online
Informant 3	Rohingya refugee	16 January 2020	Selangor
Informant 4	Rohingya refugee	16 January 2020	Kampung Sekamat, Sungai Kajang, Selangor
Informant 5	Rohingya refugee	16 January 2020	Kampung Sekamat, Sungai Kajang, Selangor
Informant 6	Chin refugee	11 February 2020	Learning Centre Cheras, Selangor
Informant 7	Syrian refugee	22 January 2020	Penang



Informant 8	Syrian refugee	22 January 22, 2020	Penang
Informant 9	Executive Director of MSRI	11 February 2020	Kuala Lumpur
Informant 10	Somali refugee school principal	11 February 2020	Somali Refugee Community Center, Gombak, Selangor

## SECONDARY DATA

Document analysis used in this study was conducted through a literature review to gather essential data from selected written or printed materials, including books, journal articles, working papers, conference papers, reports from international organizations, newspaper clippings, and websites. Frequently utilized data repositories included Mendeley and Library Genesis, facilitating access to a wide range of journals. Furthermore, online journals and articles referenced in this study were obtained through websites such as SAGE Publications, Scribd, MyJurnal, and Jstor.

## DATA ANALYSIS

The data analysis stage was conducted to obtain more precise and detailed answers to the research questions. This study opted to use a thematic approach to process the data because there is no one-size-fits-all method for analyzing qualitative data. The choice of method depends on the research objectives and context. Thematic analysis is a suitable method in this study as it allows for the analysis and classification of findings according to themes relevant to the study data. Before data is categorized into specific themes, it undergoes a classification process, including coding, categorization, and ultimately, it is divided into themes for interpretation. In qualitative research, codes typically refer to short words or phrases that are significant and represent the essence of a response obtained through interviews. As instance, the essence of the response from the interviewee “*getting to know Malaysia through a friend*”, would be the central element- this would be coded and categorized before being placed under the broader theme of “Social Network.” Another example, the interviewee stated “*I enjoy living in Malaysia because it's a peaceful country, and I can freely practice Islam*” can be understand and coded under the “Freedom of Religion.” The thematic categorization helps in understanding that social networks and peer influence play a role in the decision-making process of seeking asylum in Malaysia.

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

### DEMOGRAPHICS OF REFUGEES IN MALAYSIA

UNHCR functions as an international body that assists Malaysia in gathering information regarding refugees and asylum seekers, encompassing processes such as registration, documentation, status determination, and resettlement to third countries (Norazira Ali 2014). The total number of registrations and arrivals of refugees in Malaysia from 2009 to September 2019 is depicted in Figure 1 below:

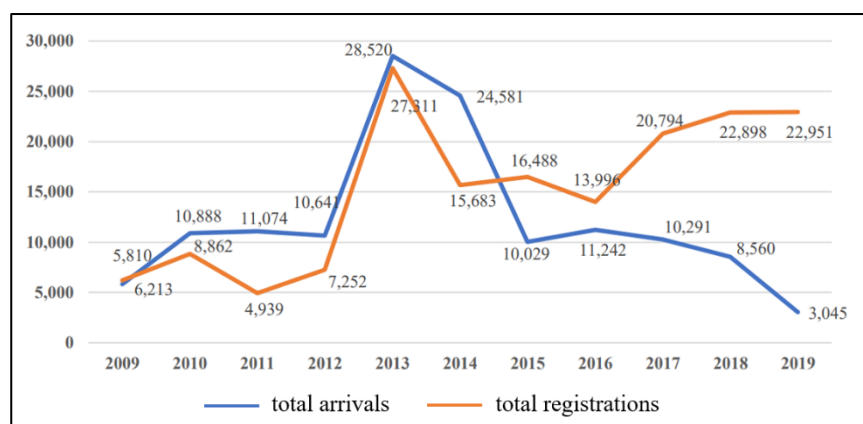


FIGURE 1. Refugee Registrations and Arrivals (2009 – September 2019)

Source: Compiled from (UNHCR 2020b)

Referring to Figure 2.1, there was an increase in the number of arrivals and registrations during the period from 2009 to 2013. However, it was observed that the number of refugee arrivals started to decline from 2014 to 2019. The highest influx of refugees to Malaysia was recorded in 2013, with a total of 28,520. Meanwhile, the highest number of refugee registrations with UNHCR Malaysia also occurred in 2013, totalling 27,311 (UNHCR 2020b). A detailed breakdown of the refugee population by ethnic group and country is provided in Table 2 below:

Country of Origin	Ethnicity	Asylum Seekers	Refugees	Total Individuals	Male		Female	
					Adult	Children (below 18 years old)	Adult	Children (below 18 years old)
Myanmar	Rohingya	15,298	86,286	101,584	61,608	13,513	14,305	12,158
	Chin	9,646	13,015	22,661	9,617	3,527	6,070	3,447
	Others	9,882	20,338	30,220	15,765	3,539	7,927	3,201
<b>Subtotal (Myanmar)</b>		<b>34,826</b>	<b>119,639</b>	<b>154,465</b>	<b>86,990</b>	<b>20,526</b>	<b>28,143</b>	<b>18,806</b>
Pakistan		3,530	3,166	6,696	2,652	1,198	1,789	1,057
Yemen		3,511	210	3,721	2,263	409	673	376
Somalia		1,668	1,642	3,310	860	546	1,315	589
Syria		2,894	414	3,308	1,774	438	703	393
Afghanistan		1,186	1,479	2,665	825	650	710	480
Sri Lanka		995	828	1,823	1,001	170	478	174
Iraq		850	422	1,272	539	208	333	192
Palestine		574	219	793	445	114	132	102
Iran		208	242	450	234	39	147	30
Sudan		151	160	311	180	41	52	38
Other countries		461	246	707	324	92	211	80
<b>Subtotal (Excluding Myanmar)</b>		<b>16,028</b>	<b>9,028</b>	<b>25,056</b>	<b>11,097</b>	<b>3,905</b>	<b>6,543</b>	<b>3,511</b>
<b>Grand Total</b>		<b>50,854</b>	<b>128,667</b>	<b>179,521</b>	<b>98,087</b>	<b>24,431</b>	<b>34,686</b>	<b>22,317</b>

TABLE 2. The Population Segmentation of Refugees in Malaysia Until March 2020

Source: (UNHCR 2020b)

As of March 31, 2020, Malaysia had a total of 179,521 refugees, which accounts for 0.5 percent of Malaysia's total population (32 million) majority of them originated from Myanmar, comprising 154,465 individuals (101,580 Rohingya, 22,661 Chins, 30,220 other ethnicities from Myanmar), while the remaining 25,056 came from other countries. Among this population, 98,087 were males, 34,686 were females, and 46,748 were children under the age of 18. UNHCR Malaysia successfully resettled a total of 317 refugees to third countries, with the United States being the highest recipient at 232 individuals, followed by Australia with 62

individuals, New Zealand with 18 individuals, Sweden with 4 individuals, and Canada with one individual. Meanwhile, the distribution of the refugee population by state in Peninsular Malaysia is depicted in Table 3 below:

State	Total
Selangor	66,030
Kuala Lumpur	27,370
Pulau Pinang	18,660
Johor	14,332
Kedah	12,570
Terengganu	5,780
Pahang	5,630
Kelantan	4,520
Perak	3,780
Negeri Sembilan	2,670
Melaka	1,990
Putrajaya	450
Perlis	280

TABLE 3. Refugee Settlement Locations in Peninsular Malaysia Until December 2019  
Source: (UNHCR 2020b)

Following to Table 3, Selangor is the state with the highest number of refugees in Malaysia, totaling 66,030 individuals, followed by Kuala Lumpur with 27,370 individuals, and subsequently, Penang with 18,660 individuals. The rest are distributed across Johor (14,332 individuals), Kedah (12,570 individuals), Terengganu (5,780 individuals), Pahang (5,630 individuals), Kelantan (4,520 individuals), Perak (3,780 individuals), Negeri Sembilan (2,670 individuals), Melaka (1,990 individuals), Putrajaya (450 individuals), and Perlis (250 individuals) (UNHCR 2020b). Selangor, Kuala Lumpur, and Penang have become the preferred destinations for most refugees due to the abundant employment opportunities compared to other states (Norazira Ali 2014).

#### **The Pull Factors: Malaysia as a Destination Country for Refugees in Southeast Asia**

In Southeast Asia, Malaysia continues to be one of the largest host countries for refugees, despite not being a member of the 1951 Refugee Convention and the 1967 Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees (Salawati Mat Basir 2015). Therefore, this section analyzes the pull factors influencing refugees' choice of Malaysia as a destination to seek protection. Based on findings from interviews and supported by secondary sources, there are four pull factors that drive refugee influx into Malaysia, as follows:

##### **i. Geographical**

Typically, when refugees find themselves in conflict due to crises in their country, compelling them to migrate, they tend to choose a neighboring or nearby country for refuge (Aizat Khairi 2018; Moore & Shellmen 2006; Yoo & Koo 2014; European Asylum Support Office 2016). For most refugees, they perceive the safest option to be the one closest to their home country (Perham 2018). According to statistics released by UNHCR in 2018, a total of 70.98 million refugees, asylum seekers, internally displaced persons (IDPs), worldwide were recorded in



2018. Out of this number, four out of five refugees worldwide opted for shelter in neighboring or neighboring countries (UNHCR 2018a).

For instance, Lebanon has become a destination for 475,100 Palestinian refugees, including Jordan, which also provides refuge to 2,242,600 Palestinian refugees in their country (UNHCR 2018a). The proximity of both bordering countries has led Palestinian refugees to choose these nations as places of protection. Meanwhile, more than 5 million Syrian refugees are currently located in neighboring countries such as Lebanon, Turkey, and Jordan. The World Bank's report (2011) also supports this argument, revealing that about 75% of refugees choose protection in neighboring countries, whether by land or sea, adjacent to their home country. A study conducted on Indonesian Chinese and Philippine Moro refugees found that strategic geographical factors, short travel distances, and proximity to their home regions influenced these ethnic groups to seek refuge in Sabah (Aizat Khairi 2016).

On the other hand, the study by Yoo and Koo (2014), found that asylum seekers tend to favor the nearest country with easily penetrable borders for protection. Informant's 1 statement also acknowledges that Malaysia's porous borders, stemming from weak border enforcement, make it an attractive destination for refugees to enter the country illegally (Interview: Informant 1 2020). A Rohingya refugees in Malaysia, Informant 4- a 38-year-old- live in Kajang, shares the same insight:

*"...our people are now in twenty-eight countries. We chose Malaysia because it's close, and we don't have much capital; if we had more capital, we could go to Saudi Arabia. Here, it's nearby, right after Thailand, it's Malaysia, and I have limited capital..."*  
(Interview: Informant 4 2020)

Referring to the essence of these interviews, financial constraints play a significant role in influencing refugees to choose the nearest country due to lower costs. In Informant 4's case, if he had sufficient funds, he would have fled to Saudi Arabia; however, due to financial limitations, he opted for the closest country, Malaysia. In another interview, Informant 5, who was 17 years old when he first entered the country, revealed that initially, he was not promised entry into Malaysia by an agent. He and 90 of his friends fled on a small boat, and while in the middle of the sea, they encountered a Thai fisherman who informed them that the boat had reached the Thailand-Malaysia border (Interview: Informant 5 2020). Based on the interview findings and supported by secondary sources, the study concludes that geographical is a significant pull factor for refugees choosing Malaysia due to its closest location to their home country and cost-effectiveness.

## ii. Social Network

Social networks are one of the factors influencing refugees in determining their destination country; the factor refers to the network of relationships within their ethnic group- friends or relatives who are already in that country (European Asylum Support Office 2016). The networks of connections or chain migration are crucial because they provide preliminary information (Zarina Othman et al. 2016), such as job prospects and labor opportunities, information about housing facilities, and their experiences in that country (Wijitapure 2017; Crawley 2010; Neumayer 2005). Social network relationships help reduce costs, movement risks, and ensure the safety of refugees based on the initial information obtained. The argument regarding social networks is also supported by research conducted by several scholars such as

(Aizat Khairi 2012; Azizah Kassim 2009; Mohd Nur Hidayat & Iknor Azli Ibrahim 2017) on Moro refugees from Southern Philippines. The group fled to Sabah due to familial ties and kinship with the local population, most of whom also had connections with the Moro community. Social networks have existed for a long time, to the extent that their way of life, customs, and religion are similar, which encouraged them to seek refuge in Sabah when conflict arose. Informant 7, a 24-year-old Syrian refugee also acknowledged that he came to Malaysia because was invited by his cousin, who is also a Syrian national:

*“...I fled to Malaysia out of fear of being conscripted into forced military service in Syria. Coincidentally, at that time, my cousin was working at a Halab restaurant in Penang. He invited me to seek refuge in Malaysia and work here...”* (Interview: Informant 7 2020)

Informant 7 recounted that the Syrian government had imposed mandatory military conscription on every young man aged 18 and above. Therefore, upon reaching the age of 18, he made the decision to flee, and simultaneously, his cousin, who was working in Penang, invited to seek refuge in Malaysia. Social network connections not only exist among Syrian refugees but also serve as an influential factor attracting some Rohingya refugees to come to Malaysia, as illustrated below:

*“...my friend works as a grass cutter in Malaysia. He invited me to come to Malaysia. He told me that Malaysia is easy to find work and you can earn a lot more money compared to our hometown, so I came to this country...”* (Interview: Informant 4 2020)

Based on the interview, Informant 4 mentioned that he received a lot of information from his friend who had been in Malaysia for a long time- helped him find accommodation and work after arriving in Malaysia. An interview with Informant 6, a Chin refugee, also stated that he came to Malaysia in 2014 to join his parents and siblings who had been in the country since 2012 (Interview: Informant 6 2020). In addition, to social networks within their own communities, refugees also obtain information from broader social networks, such as social media and the Internet, which have been on the rise. Information is more easily and quickly accessible through the use of smartphones (Cummings et al. 2015). In summary, social networks are crucial for refugees in determining whether they are safe to seek refuge in a country based on the information provided by their friends or relatives. Social networks within refugee ethnic groups can lead to the formation of larger communities (Intan Suria Hamzah, Sity Daud & Nor Azizan Idris 2016) and eventually contribute to the establishment of several NGOs representing these ethnic groups (Norazira Ali 2014). However, for the receiving country, the social network connections can have a compounded effect on the number of refugees entering the country due to the occurrence of chain migration (Arango 2000).

### iii. Visa Exemption Policy

Refugees enter Malaysia through various means, including land, sea, and air routes. Typically, refugees from distant countries such as Africa and the Middle East use air routes, while refugees from neighboring countries in the South Asian region, such as the Philippines, Myanmar, and Vietnam, use land routes by crossing the Malaysia-Thailand land border or the sea routes between Malaysia-Thailand and Indonesia-Philippines (Mohd Na'eim et al. 2017; Intan Suria Hamzah, Sity Daud, Nor Azizan Idris 2016). Research findings indicate that

Malaysia's transformation from a transit country for refugees to a destination for them has been influenced by the government's policy of exempting visa requirements upon entry. Furthermore, the introduction of Visa on Arrival (VOA) in September 2006, as part of the Visit Malaysia Year 2007 campaign aimed at boosting tourism, played a significant role in facilitating this shift. Immigration Circular Malaysia No. 32 of 2006, dated August 25, 2006, specified the provisions of this regulation, allowing tourists to conveniently apply for a visa upon arrival in Malaysia for a fee of only RM100.00, in compliance with the Immigration Act 1951.

Based on an interview conducted with 26 year old, Informant 10, a Somali refugee in the Somali Refugee Community, most Somali refugees in the country choose Malaysia because it is easy to enter without requiring a visa. Even though their visas have expired, they are allowed to remain in the country as they await refugee cards from UNHCR (Interview: Informant 10 2020). The interview findings are further reinforced by the research conducted by Atika Shafinaz, Kartini Aboo, and Nizam Sulaiman (2019) and Suzarika Sahak, Rohaida Nordin, and Ma Kalthum (2020), which state that Malaysia's government policy of exempting visa requirements upon entry has led to an increase in the number of refugee arrivals. The openness of Malaysia's government policy, which exempts visa requirements for most Islamic countries, has become an attraction for refugees, especially those from the Middle East (Katrina 2018).

Informant 9, the Executive Director of MSRI, an NGO that oversees refugee affairs in Malaysia, also acknowledges the reason for this. She stated that the visa exemption has rendered the country's borders easily accessible to refugees, as they can freely utilize tourist visas until the visas expire, resulting in their presence going undetected (Interview: Informant 9 2020). This argument gains further support from Informant 1 (2020), who confirmed that Malaysia's government's "generosity" in granting visa exemptions to most countries has had a detrimental impact, making it an attractive destination for more refugees to enter the country. Therefore, the study discovered that the implementation of the visa exemption policy for tourists has provided an advantage to refugees, making it easier for them to enter Malaysia as they do not need to possess a visa, which serves as an entry control requirement for the country.

#### iv. Freedom of Religion

Malaysia's status as one of the Islamic countries in the Southeast Asian region has attracted a significant influx of Islamic refugees. The freedom to practice their beliefs, which they couldn't attain in their home countries, has driven them to seek refuge elsewhere. Malaysia has become a destination for protection for nearly 90 percent of Islamic refugees, primarily Rohingya refugees (UNHCR 2020b; Mohd Nur Hidayat & Iknor Azli Ibrahim 2017). Aizat Khairi's research (2016) further substantiates this argument, revealing that the entry of Rohingya refugees into Malaysia is driven by the nation's status as an Islamic country. Additionally, statements made by Informant 1 (2020) during an interview and by Informant 2 (2020), an officer from the National Security Council, also affirm that most refugees choose Malaysia due to its Islamic status.

Exploring the history of Islamic refugee influx into Malaysia, numerous studies have been conducted by previous scholars. These include studies on the arrival of Bosnian refugees by Wan Shawaluddin (2000); Ahmad Faisal (2008); and Azlizan Mat Enh (2007). Research by Atika Shafinaz (2016) found that during Tun Mahathir Mohammad's era, Malaysia became a

destination for Islamic refugees, as the foreign policy at the time emphasized the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) as the second focus after ASEAN. Malaysia's policy at the time also paid attention to the plight of persecuted Pakistani refugees who were prevented from practicing their religion and faced punishment if they disobeyed. This situation led many Pakistani refugees to seek refuge in Malaysia because Malaysia was an Islamic country (Katrina 2018). The freedom to practice the teachings of Islam (Wake & Cheung 2016), coupled with Malaysia's open-minded society (Mohd Nasaruddin Parzi & Muhammad Mustakim Ramli 2015) in welcoming them, has become an attraction for Muslim refugees to come to Malaysia, as stated in the interview with Informant 8, a Syrian refugee currently living in Penang:

*"...I came to Malaysia in 2011 to work as an executive chef on a contract basis at Tarbush Restaurant in Bukit Bintang, holding an Employment Pass. However, after the crisis in Syria, I brought my parents and younger sister to Malaysia to seek protection. I enjoy living in Malaysia because it's a peaceful country, and I can freely practice Islam. Since being here, my father can go to the mosque to pray at any time without fear..."* (Interview: Informant 8 2020)

Based on Informant 8's statement above, he and his family are very grateful for being able to seek refuge in this country and practice the teachings of Islam freely without fear. Meanwhile, Informant 3, a Rohingya refugee interviewed, also acknowledges that he feels safe living in Malaysia because he has never been prevented from practicing the teachings of Islam. According to Informant 3:

*"I fled through Golok and then entered Malaysia. I was afraid to stay in Thailand because they don't like Muslims. I was afraid they would treat me like they do in my own country because they are Buddhists. Malaysia is a Muslim country, and the people are good; I like living here"* (Interview: Informant 3 2020)

Informant 3 also mentioned that they now have a mosque for the Rohingya community, which was built in Taman Mesra, Kajang, Selangor. They were concerned about staying in Thailand because most of the population there is Buddhist, which reminded them of their past experiences in their home country, as documented in the research findings by Intan Suria Hamzah, Sity Daud, and Nor Azizan Idris (2016). The issue of religious discrimination is not only experienced by Syrian, Rohingya, and Palestinian refugees but also by other refugees, as revealed in an interview with Informant 10 - she originally sought protection in Yemen but had to become a refugee once again when the situation in Yemen became chaotic. At that time, she decided to flee to Malaysia because, in addition to the visa exemption factor, Malaysia is also a safe Islamic country.

In a nutshell, Malaysia has become a destination for Muslim refugees to seek additional protection, given that the majority of its population is Muslim. Muslim refugees maintain the conviction the protection are better guaranteed in Islamic countries as a result of their common faith and religious affiliation. This belief is grounded in the notion that in a country where Islam is the predominant religion, there is an inherent sense of familiarity and understanding of their religious practices and cultural norms. As a result, they anticipate a greater level of acceptance and support from both the government and the local community; this shared religious identity

creates a sense of solidarity, which in turn fosters an environment perceived as more conducive to their well-being and protection.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this research has shed light on the demographics of refugees in Malaysia and the pull factors that drive them to choose Malaysia as a destination for seeking protection. The data presented in this study reveals a significant refugee population in Malaysia, accounting for 0.5 per cent of the country's total population. The majority of these refugees originate from Myanmar, particularly the Rohingya community, and are distributed across various states in Peninsular Malaysia, with Selangor, Kuala Lumpur, and Penang being the preferred destinations due to employment opportunities.

The pull factors identified in this research encompass geographical, social networks, visa exemption policies, and the freedom of religion. Geographical factors play a crucial role, as refugees tend to seek refuge in nearby countries for safety and cost-effectiveness. Social networks within refugee communities and the information they provide about job prospects and housing facilities facilitate the decision to choose Malaysia. The visa exemption policy has made Malaysia easily accessible to refugees, especially from Islamic countries. Finally, the freedom to practice their religion in Malaysia, coupled with its status as an Islamic country, attracts a significant influx of Islamic refugees.

Understanding these pull factors is essential for policymakers, humanitarian organizations, and host countries to develop informed strategies for managing and supporting the refugee population in Malaysia. It is evident that Malaysia's unique position as a destination country for refugees in Southeast Asia is influenced by a combination of geographic, social, policy, and religious factors. In sum, we argue, that addressing the needs and challenges of refugees in Malaysia requires a comprehensive and context-specific approach that takes these abovementioned factors into account.

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Emyzai Zainudin  
Ministry of Human Resource  
Putrajaya  
Malaysia  
E-mail: emyzai.hazrulnyezam@gmail.com

Atika Shafinaz Nazri (corresponding author)  
Institute of Ethnic Studies (KITA)  
National University of Malaysia (UKM)  
Malaysia  
Email: atikashafinaz@ukm.edu.my