



Article

The Human (In)Security of Syrian Refugees in Malaysia

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Abstract: The ongoing Syrian conflict has resulted in millions of refugees fleeing the country since 2011. In 2015, the Malaysian government pledged to host 3000 Syrian refugees to continue their lives safely in Malaysia before returning to Syria when the war ends. However, Malaysia has not ratified the 1951 Refugee Convention or its 1967 Protocol, which serves as an international treaty that recognises refugees' status and protects their rights. Due to the non-existence of a legal framework to protect refugees and externally displaced persons, this article argues that human security threats are very likely to be faced by Syrian refugees in Malaysia, despite the implementation of the Syrian Migrant Temporary Settlement Program (PPSMS) by the Malaysian government. Through qualitative research and in-depth interviews with selected government officials, Syrian refugees and non-governmental organisations (NGOs), the analysis in this article revealed that there are major security concerns that have impacted existing Syrian refugees in Malaysia, which can be viewed from different interdependent human security dimensions, such as political, economic, health and social security.

Keywords: human security; NGO; PPSMS; Syrian refugees; Malaysia



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1. Introduction

The ongoing civil war in Syria has reached its eleventh year since the start of the Syrian uprising in 2011. Major unrest erupted across the streets of Damascus and Aleppo, with protesters demanding democratic reforms and economic stability. The peaceful protests turned into a massive civil war between the government troops and the rebel groups. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the Syrian war is “the worst man-made disaster since the Second World War”. The war has killed hundreds of thousands and displaced millions of Syrians since it started. At least 5.5 million refugees are living in neighbouring countries, such as Türkiye, Jordan, Lebanon, Iraq and Egypt, and within Syria, 6 million people are internally displaced. Syrians make up one-third of all refugees around the world, with 80 percent of Syrian refugees living below the poverty line, with limited access to basic services, education or job opportunities (UNHCR 2020). Refugees are defined and protected by international law and must not be expelled or returned to situations where their life and freedom are at risk. They are a group of people who have fled war, violence, conflict or persecution and have crossed an international border to find safety in another country. The non-refoulement principle is a fundamental principle of international law that forbids a country receiving asylum seekers from returning them to a country in which they would be in likely danger of persecution based on “race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion” (Trevisanut 2014). On the protection of refugees, the 1951 Refugee Convention is a key legal document that defines a refugee as:

Someone who is unable or unwilling to return to their country of origin owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion.

Malaysia's Experience with Refugees

Malaysia has not ratified the 1951 Refugee Convention or its 1967 Protocol. This means the country neither recognises their status nor protects their rights. Thus, refugees are regarded as illegal immigrants under the Malaysian Immigration Act 1959/63 (Act 155), the only legal document referred to by the government pertaining to refugee status. Refugees are subjected to Section 6 of Act 155, which specifies the control of entry into Malaysia, where no person other than a citizen shall enter Malaysia unless they hold a valid entry permit/pass. Refugees who face detention at an immigration depot are subject to be removed from Malaysia under Section 34 of Act 155, which states:

Where any person is ordered to be removed from Malaysia under this Act, such person may be detained in custody for such period as may be necessary for the purpose of making arrangements for his removal.

However, refugees with UNHCR cards receive a “de facto stateless” status in the country, which allows them to receive limited protection from the authorities and immigration in Malaysia. Hence, they will be released from the detention centre at the discretion of the Director General. Mahathir Mohamad (personal communication), during his second tenure as Prime Minister, remarked on the government’s stand on the refugee issue in Malaysia as follows:

“We have been more friendly towards people in trouble. When people seek refuge, if they have no other places to go, we have to accept them. But I do hope that some settlement is reached in which refugees can go back to their country, but of course they are afraid to go back. We hope some of them would be able to go back to their country of origin, once things get better”.

Over the last four decades, Malaysia has experienced handling different groups of refugees from around the world. After the Vietnam War ended in 1975, the first group of Vietnamese refugees landed on Bidong Island, Terengganu, to escape communist rule. More than 200,000 refugees, known as “boat people”, lived in temporary refugee camps on the island between 1975 and the 1990s (Selamat 2022). When the island-camp closed in 1991, the refugees were transferred to the Sungai Besi Camp in Kuala Lumpur until 1996. From 1975 until 1996, UNHCR assisted the Malaysian government in providing protection and assistance to these refugees.

In the 1980s, due to the political instability and conflict in Mindanao, South Philippines, nearly 100,000 Muslim Moro fled to neighbouring Sabah (a state of Malaysia located in northern Borneo and in the region of East Malaysia) (Kassim 2009). During the same period of time, several thousand ethnic Chams, known as *Melayu Champa*, escaped the atrocities of the Khmer Rouge regime in Cambodia and sought refuge in Malaysia. The migration of the ethnic Cham refugees to Malaysia ended in 1985, and the number of refugees reached a total of 61,000 people living throughout Peninsular Malaysia, but many were concentrated in the state of Kelantan (Danny 2013).

In the mid-1990s, Malaysia granted asylum to Bosnian citizens who were brutally suppressed by the civil war in Yugoslavia at the time. The war resulted in more than 350 Bosnian Muslims seeking asylum in Malaysia between 1992 and 1995 (Ahmad et al. 2016). In the 2000s, Malaysia hosted refugees from war-torn countries such as Afghanistan, Indonesia, Iraq, Palestine, Somalia, Sri Lanka and Thailand. This “southern migration” is not as large as the influx of Filipino and Indochinese refugees back in the 1980s, but it has become a feature of migration in Malaysia (Idris 2012).

In May 2015, Malaysia was stunned by the arrival of Rohingya refugees aboard fishing boats on Malaysian waters off the Andaman Sea near Langkawi Island, Kedah. The tensions that erupted and raged between the Muslim minority and Buddhist populations in Rakhine State had caused hundreds of thousands of ethnic Rohingya to be displaced and become stateless people. The Rohingya refugee crisis is clearly a manifestation of a nation’s failure to protect the basic needs of its people in terms of freedom from fear or freedom from want (Othman and Mat 2018).

In October 2015, the Malaysian government pledged to host 3000 Syrian refugees to continue their lives safely in Malaysia before returning to Syria when the war ends. The then Prime Minister, Najib Razak, made the announcement at the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) in New York as a commitment by the government to help the refugees on a humanitarian basis. This is in line with the concept of burden sharing in the international refugee protection regime, emphasised in Article 4 of the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, which is an international cooperation to solve global problems (Inder 2017). A local news portal, The Star Online, reported that based on the government's pledge, Syrian refugees would also be allowed to work while seeking refuge in the country (The Star Online 2015).

2. Literature Review and Conceptual Frameworks

The concept of security in International Relations is often viewed from the perspective of national security. Realism theory emphasises the security aspect as the main agenda of every state, where the government is responsible for ensuring that its country, people, borders, territories and core values are protected and free from any form of security threats. After the end of the Cold War, security discussions began to include issues of non-traditional threats, such as organised crime, human smuggling, drug and arms trafficking and also threats to human rights. Buzan (1991) criticised the view of the concept of security as a safeguard for the survival and preservation of the country's integrity and sovereignty in facing those who are considered enemies to the nation. He then proposed five interrelated dimensions of security within the framework of a comprehensive human security concept: military, political, economic, community and environmental. This concept was further developed by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) in the Human Development Report (HDR) 1994 titled "A New Dimension on Human Security", which also introduced seven dimensions of the human security framework: environmental, economic, health, personal, community, political and food.

Ramli et al. (2012) argued that the concept of human safety is universal, but this concept also needs to be viewed from a perspective that takes into account the differences and uniqueness of a country or region. Thus, researchers from the National University of Malaysia, Bangi, proposed a social security element through the Bangi Approach to Human Security (BAGHUS) to strengthen the argument for human security from the perspective of the Southeast Asian region. Social security should also be given attention by enhancing efforts to ensure community and economic security. Acharya (2006), Caballero-Anthony (2005) and Othman (2009) argued that globalisation affects not only the economy, politics and national security but also human security in relation to issues such as poverty, food shortages, rising food prices, declining health and education quality, and that it also affects individuals and families and eventually creates tension in the community. Othman and Mat (2018) and Saidin (2018) emphasised that globalisation has also contributed to the development of easier, faster telecommunications and information delivery, and this has partly been the cause of the Arab uprisings and regional conflict.

Othman (2009) maintained that the assumption that individual security will be ensured if national security is preserved seems presently inadequate when, in some cases, the country also poses a threat to an individual's life. Such a situation can be seen in some of the refugee crises, where refugees are fleeing to foreign countries as a result of oppression, cruelty and warfare within their own countries. Othman and Idris (2015) opined that the presence of refugees in a country can be a threat, as it is closely linked to national security features, where security is an important factor in a nation's survival. Deikun and Zetter (2010), and Fábos and Kibreab (2007) viewed the presence of refugees as having negative impacts on the local community, especially in areas with a high population density, such as Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia and sub-Saharan Africa. The damage is not mainly attributed to the refugees, but overpopulation could affect the environment and society, as has ensued in many highly dense cities. Adam and Moorthy (2015), who studied the influx of Syrian refugees in Türkiye, revealed that the increasing number of refugees on a daily basis

has indeed threatened and affected the country's economic, social and political stability and security.

Inconsistencies in Policies towards Refugees

The inconsistencies in policies towards refugees from different nations is also problematic in Malaysia. As a consequence, refugees from various countries receive varying treatment from Malaysians. Paradoxically, Malaysia has been actively accommodating refugees since their independence, both from other neighbouring states, such as Vietnam, Cambodia and Indonesia, and from overseas, such as Bosnian, Palestinian and Syrian refugees (Ahmad et al. 2016). Malaysian's earliest contribution to a major refugee crisis was helping Vietnamese refugees escaping political persecution, economic reforms and restructuring programmes in 1975 (Hoffstaedter 2017).

The influx of Vietnamese refugees triggered uneasy feelings amongst Malaysians, especially those living near refugees, as many perceived the refugees to be causing social and economic problems (Idris 2012). However, it was during this influx of refugees, thirty years ago, when Malaysia was the most successful at handling and managing refugees through the Comprehensive Plan of Action for Indochinese Refugees (Ahmad et al. 2016). The plan provided a framework for Malaysia that included temporarily housing around 250,000 refugees in camps along the eastern shore (Hoffstaedter 2017). They were gradually repatriated back to Vietnam until 2005 (Idris 2012). This event demonstrated that Malaysia is capable of establishing an effective refugee management plan with the help of other nations. Malaysians also accepted Champa refugees who were escaping from the ethnic cleansing operations of the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia during the 1970s (Hoffstaedter 2017). As the atrocities reached regional and international communities, the refugees were given two options by the Malaysian authorities, which were to transit in Malaysia and later resettle in third countries or to integrate into Malaysian society (Idris 2012). The second option was permissible due to "humanitarian reasons and also the common Muslim brotherhood factor" (Hoffstaedter 2017).

The policy was successful, as the Champa communities became a part of Malaysian society, and this is largely due to the similarity in cultural and religious values between the Champa and Malays, especially being predominantly Sunni Muslims (Idris 2012). The Champa rapidly integrated into Malay majority communities, starting out in Kelantan and then moving to the other side of the peninsula, with help from the government (Hoffstaedter 2017). Policymakers also regarded the Champa integration policy as nonthreatening to Malaysia's public harmony since Champa refugees were exceptionally accepted by the Malays, and the Sultans of the particular states did not object to the Champa's company and assimilation in their territory (Idris 2012).

Most notable is the Malaysian government's policy towards refugees who came from overseas. During the ethnic cleansing of Bosnian Muslims by Serb nationalists in the Bosnian War in 1992, Malaysia urged the United Nations to push for more oversight in the protection of Bosnian Muslims (Hoffstaedter 2017). Malaysia was one of the strongest supporters of the Bosnian cause during the war, and it remained the only Asian country to accept Bosnian refugees (Ahmad et al. 2016). Bosnian refugees also received a similarly structured programme to the Vietnamese who had protection from the government, including access to basic refugee protection provisions (Idris 2012). They were considered a special class of refugees, as they were termed "guests," and received temporary residence passes, and Bosnian children were allowed to enrol in public schools (Ansems de Vries 2016). Many opportunities were given to Bosnian refugees, such as education opportunities, and some were offered leadership positions after repatriating back to Bosnia (Muzafarkamal and Hossain 2019). The Malaysian government provided scholarships to students and basic housing and allowed Bosnian refugees to work, which is unlike the treatment given to the current Rohingya refugees (Ahmad et al. 2016).

Ultimately, the Malaysian government has also provided strong support to Syrian and Palestinian refugees. In 2015, the former premier Najib Razak pledged to welcome 3000

Syrian refugees in three years to mitigate the refugee crisis (Ahmad et al. 2016). In addition, the former Home Minister Ahmad Zahid Hamidi also stated that Syrian immigrants would be given work visas and students would receive student visas (ibid). It is evident that the Islamic religion plays an important role in Malaysia, as the government was actively raising awareness for Syrian and Palestinian refugees, as they were fellow Muslims in need of help (Hoffstaedter 2017).

3. Research Methods

This study adopted a qualitative approach to explore human security issues among Syrian refugees in Malaysia. The process of data collection was mainly based on a series of in-depth interviews with selected respondents in Malaysia from 2019 to 2022. Sources of information and primary data were obtained via face-to-face conversations with the following group of respondents: (1) key informants from Malaysian Humanitarian Aid and Relief (MAHAR); (2) local policymakers and political leaders, including the former Malaysian Prime Minister, Mahathir Mohamad; (3) five selected Syrian refugees in Selangor and Kuala Lumpur. The nature of these interviews was predominantly semi-formal—the interviewees were requested to share their views and experiences based on a list of open-ended questions related to the central issues.

The interview sessions were also recorded and transcribed by the researchers, depending on interviewees' permission. The demographics of the interviewed Syrian refugees is briefly summarized as follows: (1) they are aged between 20 and 42 years old, are all Muslims of Syrian Arab ethnicity and have lived in Malaysia for between five and ten years since the Syrian conflict erupted; (2) three of the refugees hold the IMM13 status, while the remaining two refugees are registered under the UNHCR; (3) in terms of employment in Malaysia, a variety of jobs were recorded, such as teacher, cashier, business owner and student; and (4) their places of origin vary from Damascus to Hims, Latakia and Aleppo. Data from the interviews were coded and evaluated with the assistance of the Software for Qualitative Data Analysis (NVIVO). The analysis phase pursued in this study was both descriptive and explanatory in nature. To sum up, there were several procedures undertaken by the researchers to thematically analyse the interview data. First, the researchers transcribed all the recordings and translated them from Arabic or Malay into English. Secondly, the researchers grouped the responses into specific questions in order to make sense of the data based on research objectives. Thirdly, the researchers developed a list of nodes (themes) to see the connections between the data and questions. Lastly, the researchers made comparisons between respondents based on their specific responses and experiences as Syrian refugees in Malaysia. Library research was also conducted to obtain secondary data and sources from previous studies in the form of journal articles, books, newspapers and reports on official websites of government agencies and international organisations.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. *The Entry of Syrian Refugees in Malaysia*

Malaysia pledged to accept Syrian refugees at the height of the refugee crisis. In September 2015, the infamous picture of the death of a two-year-old Syrian boy, Aylan Kurdi, on a beach in Türkiye after he drowned in the Mediterranean Sea, along with his mother and brother, made global headlines and was an eye-opener for countries to take responsibility for helping Syrian refugees. Burden sharing is a subset of international cooperation in which states take on responsibility for refugees who, in terms of international refugee law, would fall under the protection of other states or assist other states in fulfilling their responsibilities (Newland 2011).

The entry of Syrian refugees in Malaysia is slightly different from other groups of refugees. As per the definition, refugees are usually forcefully displaced and cross the country's border on foot in a state of deprivation. However, Syrian refugees were invited to Malaysia and officially welcomed at the Kuala Lumpur International Airport. Although it

seems similar to the entry of the previous Bosnian refugees (circa 1995–1996), the Malaysian government's approach to handling the Syrian group is rather different. Despite not being a party to the 1951 Refugee Convention, Malaysia welcomes Syrian refugees to seek protection in the country and enjoy limited rights under a special programme.

Malaysia's efforts to help Syrians saw the arrival of the first group of Syrian refugees in Kuala Lumpur on 8 December 2015. The group consisted of eight people from two families from Idlib District, who were flown directly from Istanbul after they were screened and selected in Beirut, Lebanon, by a Special Task Force on behalf of the Malaysian government handling the entry of Syrian refugees into the country. The government initiated a special programme, namely, the Syrian Migrants Temporary Settlement Programme (PPSMS), which offers them basic rights to live in Malaysia temporarily. The government is working hand in hand with NGOs to carry out the programme and reach the target group. Malaysia Humanitarian Aid and Relief (MAHAR) is an NGO that is responsible for the registration of Syrian refugees in the PPSMS.

MAHAR (2019) also liaises with other governmental agencies, such as the Royal Malaysia Police (PDRM) for security screening and the Immigration Department for issuing a permit to stay, known as the IMM13 Card. IMM13 Card holders are allowed to work to continue their livelihoods, access medical services at half the price of the foreigner's fee at government hospitals and send their children to study in government schools. The PPSMS is open to incoming Syrians outside Malaysia, as well as to those who were already in the country prior to the government's pledge made in 2015. In most cases, they are students studying in local universities and expatriates who cannot return to Syria due to the ongoing war. They have options to register with the PPSMS or to apply for a UNHCR card to be recognised as international refugees.

4.2. Human Security Threats to Syrian Refugees

The concept of human security is to protect the essential core of human life by increasing freedom and fulfilling human needs. As noted in General Assembly Resolution 66/290, human security is an approach to assist Member States in identifying and addressing widespread and cross-cutting challenges to the survival, livelihood and dignity of their people. It calls for "people-centred, comprehensive, context-specific and prevention-oriented responses that strengthen the protection and empowerment of all people".

This concept emphasises two main aspects, which are "freedom from want" and "freedom from fear." "Freedom from want" refers to the protection of individuals so that they can meet their basic needs economically, socially and environmentally to prosper in their livelihoods. "Freedom from fear" refers to protecting individuals from threats aimed at their security and physicality, which includes various forms of violence that may arise from foreign countries, the actions of a country against its citizens, the actions of a group against others and the actions of individuals against other individuals.

The life of Syrian refugees in Malaysia seems normal, but the truth is "too good to be true". Despite being registered in the PPSMS, refugees are facing human security threats due to the fact that no legal framework exists in the country to protect them. The following section will examine the human insecurity of Syrian refugees with a focus on four dimensions of human security—political, economic, health and social. The issues of human rights, employment, healthcare and education are interconnected and fundamental for refugees' survival.

4.3. Political Insecurity

The protection of human security cannot be dissociated from the idea of upholding the rule of law and human rights, whether at home or in the transit or destination country (Ab Wahab and Khairi 2020). Another scholar, Hampson et al. (2002), argued that to protect people means that the state has to ensure their (people's) full enjoyment of social justice, fundamental freedoms and human dignity. The concept of human rights and human security are interlinked in a way that the protection of human rights and fundamental

freedoms are the key to achieving human security. However, in the context of an inadequate legal framework to protect refugees in Malaysia, they are vulnerable to being arrested, abused and exploited (Basir 2015).

According to a key informant, which is one of the Syrian refugees in Malaysia named Hasan, a few years ago, an immigration officer was arresting him and other refugees who were working in a restaurant, despite having presented a UNHCR card. The arrest was simply because Hasan did not have a passport with him, and the officer said the refugees could not work. Hasan was detained in the depot for nine days, while his brother spent two months locked in a crowded and dirty cell with very few amenities and very little food provided. Hasan (personal communication) was quoted as saying:

“They cuffed our hands and took us into a lorry and they brought us to the immigration office in Putrajaya. I was very scared and I was crying. At the immigration office, they took our fingerprints and our photos and they gave us a card before they brought us to the immigration detention centre in Bukit Jalil. The centre was dark and we had to sleep on the floor in a cell with twenty other people. The bathroom is in the cell and without drinking water. We can only drink water from the sink. The food given to us was very little like the size of my palm, twice a day. The condition is so dirty, we couldn’t see the sunlight because it’s very crowded. There were sick people and bleeding as well, but nobody cared about us inside the cell. The condition was horrifying and beyond imaginable and it traumatised me until today”.

Hasan was released on bail, where his employer had to pay an MYR 5000 (equivalent to approximately USD 1200) fine on time for him to be freed early. Hasan’s case is one of hundreds or thousands of other detainment cases faced by refugees in Malaysia. The fundamental issue is that Malaysia is not a party to the 1951 Refugee Convention or its 1967 Protocol. The failure to ratify the Convention has resulted in no proper policy being established, making it difficult for the government or local authorities to address the issue. The only migration law that is referred to is the Immigration Act 1959/63, which defined refugees as illegal immigrants in Malaysia. Therefore, due to this complex “bureaucratic procedure”, they are unable to enjoy refugees’ rights as stated in the Convention. Despite not signing the International Convention, Malaysia is obligated to comply with the principle of non-refoulement under international customary law, which forbids the country from sending refugees back home, where they would likely be in danger. In addition, Malaysia is currently in the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) for the term of 2022–2024, in which the government pledges to take a whole-of-society approach to the promotion and protection of human rights in the country.

According to Malaysia’s [Hansard Parliament of Malaysia \(2020\)](#), the government has worked towards the process of revising and updating the National Security Council (Majlis Keselamatan Negara-MKN) regulation—“Directive No. 23: Mechanism for the Management of Illegal Immigrants Holding UNHCR Cards”, which was issued in 2009—and other existing policies under the direction of the MKN. The main goal of this amendment is to further improve the management of refugees in Malaysia and, at the same time, to ensure that the government plays a leading role in determining the status of refugees and asylum seekers in the country, which was previously carried out by the local UNHCR representatives and NGOs.

4.4. Economic Insecurity

The human security concept defines economic security as the need for employment to earn a basic income to consistently sustain life. However, refugees in Malaysia are not allowed to work according to the migration law, which makes no distinction between refugees and undocumented migrants. MKN Directive No. 23 has conditionally allowed UNHCR card holders working in informal sectors to survive. Syrian refugees who registered under the PPSMS may be granted the same privilege, but it is not an absolute right. The absence of a legal framework for asylum issues has left unpredictability in the lives of

refugees in the country. Refugees are vulnerable to arrest for immigration offences and may be subject to detention, prosecution, whipping and deportation. This vulnerable group is exposed to exploitation, oppression and arrest by local authorities since they do not have valid travel documents or protection by the law (Othman and Mat 2018).

Another key informant, a Syrian refugee in Malaysia named Mazin, had almost the same experience as Hasan, but he was imprisoned in Sungai Buloh Prison for three months. Mazin received support from lawyers and the UNHCR team to expedite the process of release. He had applied for a UNHCR card before the arrest, but it took a very long time to process, and eventually, the card was issued to him after his release. At the time of his arrest in 2018, Mazin recalled that he was working as a cook in a restaurant in Cyberjaya without a work permit and overstayed his visa. Mazin (personal communication) shared his experience in prison:

“It was a very bad experience and unimaginable. A small cell is crowded with detainees. No water, dirty food, no clothes to change and can't take shower because the toilet is dirty. It's very hot in the cell because there is no fan and the ventilation is bad. You could die here because of bad conditions. I lost weight because the food served was not healthy. We had to share soap in the toilet and no toiletries were given to us. Many got sick due to viruses spread in the jail and not hygienic. The police beat me with a stick because they cannot control too many people in the jail. When ever people shout or make a complaint, they will be beaten. One reason is because the police did not understand when I tried to explain to them. The police used Malay language which I do not understand, only after three months I knew my cell number in Malay. The detainees too are fighting each other in the cell, because people are tense with the circumstance there”.

Syrian refugees who hold an IMM13 Card are allowed to work in informal sectors such as construction, manufacturing, and food and cleaning services. According to the data from MAHAR (2019), almost 70 percent of them work in the service sector, especially in food and beverage (F&B), such as cooks and waiters in restaurants around Klang Valley. About 15 percent run businesses to support their families, and the rest are working wherever they can to earn money. There are also some refugees who teach Islamic studies and the Arabic language in private schools around Klang Valley. All informants (refugees) interviewed were expecting to get better jobs to support themselves and their families while staying in Malaysia. However, in the current situation, in which they are only allowed to work in informal sectors, they have to bear the high cost of living in Klang Valley. Due to economic insecurity, they are unable to receive medical treatment or send their children to school. Employment issues among Syrian refugees are, without a doubt, in need of dire attention because they are interconnected with other human security threats, such as health and education.

4.5. Health Insecurity

According to the World Health Organization (WHO n.d.), health security is a concept that encompasses activities and measures across sovereign boundaries that mitigate public health incidents to ensure the health of populations. This is in line with the human security concept of the need for a healthy environment and health services for people to face the challenges of poor nutrition, infectious diseases and so on. It is important to be aware of the survival and well-being of people to ensure the country's survival (Othman 2009). Health security is a crucial issue among refugees in Malaysia due to being denied basic rights. One of the problems they face is paying high prices for medical services at private clinics or hospitals without government subsidies. It is a burden for those who work in informal sectors and earn enough of a salary only for food and accommodation. Al-Hasan Volunteers Network (AHVN), a Kuala Lumpur-based NGO, performs fundraising to help refugees pay for medical bills on a case-by-case basis. A refugee named Ziyad (personal communication) shared his experience on health insecurity as follows:

“I think the rights of refugees living in Turkey and Jordan are better than in Malaysia. Here you have to pay a lot of money to get medical treatment in the hospital. I have a friend who was admitted to hospital due to appendicitis and she has to pay around RM4000 for the treatment. So the Syrian Community raised some donations to help her pay the bill”.

To address this issue, the government has granted 50 percent off of medical treatment charges for Syrian refugees registered with the PPSMS at any medical institution under the Ministry of Health (KKM). The aim is to help them reduce their living costs in order to survive in Malaysia. A KKM Circular Letter dated 16 January 2017 informed all State Medical Departments, Hospitals, Health Clinics and Dental Clinics to offer a half-priced fee from the foreigner’s standard rate for medical services, including treatment, surgery, medications and out-patient treatment, for Syrian refugees. According to a Syrian refugee informant named Muhanad, in some cases, the clinic staff are not well informed about the discount for refugees under the PPSMS and only accept UNHCR card holders, and thus, a full fee is charged to the patients.

The implementation of the medical fee discount for Syrian refugees is continuous as long as they are registered under the programme and present their IMM13 Card. Despite the long-term discount provided, the language barrier problem is another issue relating to medical services. Many refugees are not fluent in English or Malay (official language of Malaysia), so they find it difficult to explain pain; hence, health issues cannot be solved properly. According to MAHAR’s refugee database, there are doctors specialising in cardiology, gynaecology and children, but they cannot practise here. To tackle this issue, one of the options is to allow them to open a consultation clinic that provides referral letters to local doctors about patients’ problems.

4.6. Social Insecurity

Human security is a necessary condition for sustainable human development, including security in several aspects, such as economic, social, health and personal. As previously mentioned, the Bangi Approach to Human Security Model (BAGHUS) has contributed a “social security” element to the human security discourse. The model discusses human security issues from an angle that takes into account the differences and uniqueness of a country or region. The addition of the social security dimension is important because of the uniqueness of the social system in the region of Southeast Asia (Ramli et al. 2012). The BAGHUS model contributes to the formation of social security elements, as well as a combination of personal security and community security elements, because there is a significant relationship between the individual and the community. BAGHUS scholars also argue that physical violence, manipulation, torture, deception and coercion are risks that can threaten human security (Ramli et al. 2012). In this context, women, children, the elderly, foreign immigrants and minority groups are the most vulnerable populations to human security threats. Therefore, state and non-state actors should work hand in hand in order to protect citizens from threats, in line with the core principles of human security, “freedom from fear” and “freedom from want”. Othman et al. (2018) viewed the Rohingya ethnic refugee crisis as a manifestation of the country’s failure to protect the basic needs of human life.

The social security element refers to public programmes designed to provide well-being to people, such as education. In principle, refugees in Malaysia are allowed to register their children in government schools without a fee. However, the enrolment is subject to seat availability and the school’s capacity to accept students. The school may not be an issue, but the matter of acceptance among local students towards refugee children has been a nightmare for them. When Hasan first arrived in Malaysia, he was 12 years old. He had a frightening experience studying in a public school due to being bullied by local students. Hasan (personal communication) shared his experience that:

“We went to a public school with the help of a Malaysian family that we knew. The school Principal made us study there without even registering as a student.

We learn the language and other subjects at school. But later, we decided to quit the school because of a bullying case that involved physical abuse. Because of that, we learn on our own by reading books, watching television and speaking to local people”.

Many refugees opted for private or international schools for their children’s education. One of the reasons is that public schools are using Malay as a medium of instruction, which the refugee children cannot follow. The language barrier makes it hard to mingle with local students and to understand lessons. However, Muhanad has a different view on sending his children to public schools and learning centres run by local NGOs. Muhanad (personal communication) shared his experience that:

“Syrian children do not mix with Malaysians. When entering a government school, you can mix and learn Malaysian culture and Malay language. So, I send my children to private Islamic kindergarten and after 6 months they can speak Malay. My son is fluent because he started school in Malaysia. Now they are in primary school at Sekolah Kita III (SK3), run by NGO Cinta Syria Malaysia (CSM) in Bangi. This school is specifically established to cater for Syrian minors, just like the Jasmine As-Sham School in Wangsa Maju, KL”.

As mentioned by Muhanad, SK3 provides free education to Syrian children. The school was established in 2018 as a continuation of two similar schools that were established in Mafraq, Jordan in 2016, and Kilis, Türkiye in 2017. SK3 is CSM’s biggest project providing free education to Syrian children in Malaysia. The school has nine classrooms with around 45 students between the ages of 4 and 16. It uses the International General Certificate of Secondary Education (IGCSE) programme, which offers English, Bahasa Melayu, Arabic, Mathematics, Science, Al-Quran, Geography, Computer and Religion subjects. In addition, the Jasmine As-Sham School in Ampang, Selangor, was established by another locally based NGO—the Global Peace Mission Malaysia (GPM)—in 2016. It is the first Syrian refugee school established in Malaysia. The school provides education to Syrian children aged 4 to 18 years old and also serves as a medium for people to help refugees in Malaysia. The subjects taught at the school are Islamic Education, Arabic, Mathematics, Science, Mandarin, Bahasa Melayu and English according to the Cambridge syllabus. Education is very important for the future of refugee children so that they do not fall behind in learning, as well as for their survival.

5. Syrian Refugees and Human Security Concerns in Malaysia: Analysis of Factors and Way Forward

Refugees engage within community strata and interaction environments, resulting in congestion and tension, which creates a variety of pressures. The presence of Syrian refugees has a variety of repercussions on the receiving nation and host communities (in this case, Malaysia), which may be described by political, economic, sociocultural and environmental aspects. For every one of those aspects, there is a node in the receiving state, and when that node contacts that state’s fabric, it causes a crack to form and instability to occur. Based on the work of Hideaki [Shinoda \(2018\)](#), the analysis of the approach to refugee adoption can be understood via four key characteristics or relative factors that indicate the influence of refugees on the receiving nation.

(1) Political Impact. As a result of the refugee influx, the receiving state has to deal with various issues, including internal conflict amongst host communities, negative political externalities, conflict infusion owing to geopolitical linkages between the sending and receiving states, and rebel mobilisation. (2) Economic Impact. Refugee economic impacts on the host country are examined using macroeconomic and fiscal data. For example, the effect of refugees on the labour market, negative externalities, commerce, banking, public spending, tourism, lost revenue and customs fees are all included in this category. (3) Sociocultural Impact. The social issues of refugees’ existence in host societies are classified into two categories: firstly, cultural differences and ethnicity shifts; secondly, social instability, high population and the complexities of refugees as a lost generation.

(4) Environmental Impact. This addresses the effects of the refugee influx on the recipient state's ecosystem, including water demand, forest decreases, soil degradation and disease.

These factors of refugee adoption in the receiving state differ depending on the receiving state's pre-crisis status. For example, the political influence may be seen in neighbouring nations and shared border areas where refugees and internally displaced persons have resided. Furthermore, the likelihood of political unrest increases when the receiving country and camps include secret radical organisations. The negative economic impact manifests itself in high poverty, unemployment rates, a vast public debt, a nonindustrial state and a weak economy. When the receiving country has a distinct language, culture and customs, the sociocultural consequences become apparent; in this case, the language barrier, stereotype, religion and exclusion issues amplify the impacts of refugees' presence. Countries with a scarcity of water, a shortage of energy resources or a harsh environment are more sensitive to refugees when they are receiving states.

Through the analysis of the human security discourse regarding Syrian refugees in Malaysia, we briefly provide policy suggestions on both domestic and international levels in order to mitigate the refugee crisis while offsetting the grievances of Malaysians and to prevent discrimination against refugees. Firstly, it is important to involve epistemic communities to advise the government, as ministers do not necessarily have substantial expertise or a background in the area of global migration. It is crucial to educate citizens about the status of Syrian refugees, as a number of Malaysians are not able to differentiate refugees from undocumented migrants. Hence, the government, whose responsibility is to inform its citizens, would need to be advised by the appropriate community with the right and accurate information. In addition, the government should also include non-governmental organisations and civil societies such as the UNHCR and other domestic organisations to contribute to policymaking.

According to [Muzafarkamal and Hossain \(2019\)](#), the ruling government, after the 2018 general election, made three promises to the refugee community, which were to supply them with UNHCR cards, giving them legal rights to work; provide labour rights on par with those received by the locals; and to ratify the 1951 Refugee Convention so they could be given proper assistance. However, Malaysia has not kept its promise to care for, let alone fight for the protection of, refugees, especially after the political turmoil that happened just before the COVID-19 outbreak, where the Pakatan Harapan coalition was suddenly replaced by Perikatan Nasional. Hence, the current government should work on implementing consistent policies for all refugees, mirroring past effective strategies, and ultimately, should ratify the 1951 Refugee Convention for Malaysians to fully accept refugees of all nations into the community.

Furthermore, Malaysia should also work with the UNHCR to mitigate the refugee crisis, as this is a transboundary issue. Despite Malaysia's non-interference principle, the country began to take a stronger stance on the protection of refugees due to increased tension in the Middle East region following the Arab Spring revolution. As this is a pressing issue, Malaysia should utilise existing mechanisms to tackle root causes and distribute responsibility without violating any nation's sovereign rights. We believe in having standardised regulations to prevent discrimination against targeted communities (in this case, Syrian refugees). There should be a "legal intervention in the form of the criminalisation of certain speech and protection of the freedom of expression of the group targeted by the abusive speech" ([Kohl 2018](#), p. 113). However, a balanced approach must be taken to ensure that any efforts to restrict speech do not deter free expression and abide by international human rights law.

6. Conclusions

Malaysia's pledge to host Syrian refugees is in line with the concept of burden sharing in the international refugee protection regime, despite it not being a party to the 1951 Refugee Convention. A programme called the PPSMS was specially created for Syrian refugees to help them continue their lives temporarily in Malaysia. The IMM13 Card is also

granted to them as a permit to stay and to get access to work, education and health services. However, this study found that there are problems that arose among Syrian refugees that could threaten their human security. These insecurities, including political, economic, health and social insecurities, are the result of having no legal framework established in local settings to protect refugees. Should Malaysia decide to maintain the status quo, a viable solution must be put in place to help refugees live better lives. This includes allowing them to work as well as giving them full access to education and health services in order to survive in Malaysia.

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