

Migration Expert Workshop (#2)

A Follow-Up Capacity Building Programme Deriving from the 1st Malaysian International Studies Association Conference (MISAC 1) & Migration Expert Workshop (#1) held from 14 to 15 February 2024, UKM

Role of Religion and Religious Networks Shaping the Everyday Life of Rohingya Refugees in Malaysia and Beyond

Date / Time: 7 November 2024 (830am to 415pm)

Venue: Bilik Mesyuarat Perdana, Aras 4, (Bangunan Baru) Bangunan Pentadbiran Fakulti Kejuruteraan dan Alam Bina (FKAB), UKM, Bangi

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◀ Migration Expert Workshop #2 Report ▶

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DIALOGUE SESSION 1: MIGRATION EXPERT WORKSHOP

The Role of Religion and Religious Networks in Building Greater Solidarity – Building from What Works in Malaysia

Moderated by Associate Prof. Dr. Bakri Mat, Universiti Utara Malaysia (UUM)

The first dialogue session of the Migration Expert Workshop, titled “The Role of Religion and Religious Networks in Building Greater Solidarity – Building from What Works in Malaysia,” focused on the significant contributions of religious values, leadership, and networks in promoting solidarity within and beyond the Rohingya community in Malaysia. With its fundamental values of compassion, justice, and service, religion provides a powerful basis for unity and mutual respect between refugees and host communities, creating a welcoming environment conducive to harmonious integration.

Religious leaders, who are often trusted figures within their communities, play a crucial role in shaping positive experiences for refugees. They address misconceptions, challenge prejudice, and inspire inclusive, compassionate responses to the struggles of the Rohingya. These leaders not only provide spiritual guidance but also foster social cohesion, encouraging communities to meet refugees with dignity and respect.

Equally important are religious networks embedded within local communities, which mobilise resources and establish essential support systems to aid refugees as they adapt to new environments. These networks provide both material and emotional support, reinforcing a sense of security and belonging among refugees. The session underscored the value of these networks in creating safe and supportive spaces that enhance the integration of refugees.

The following sections capture the insights shared by each speaker, illustrating the profound impact of religion and religious networks in supporting the Rohingya community. The discussions offer concrete recommendations to leverage these resources to foster solidarity, bridge cultural divides, and build an inclusive environment that supports both refugees and their host communities.

Mr Rahmat, President of the Rohingya Society Malaysia (RSM)

Mr Rahmat addressed the persistent issues facing the Rohingya due to their stateless status, which remains unresolved despite Myanmar’s political changes. He highlighted the continuous need for efforts to secure basic rights for the Rohingya, rights that are relevant not only within Myanmar but also in countries that host Rohingya refugees, such as Malaysia, Indonesia, Thailand, and Bangladesh. An example given was the marriage registration system in Malaysia, which helps Rohingya women access specific rights in marriage and,

if necessary, in divorce. The core issue remains the stateless status of the Rohingya, which needs resolution before other concerns can be fully addressed. Mr Rahmat noted that many Rohingya come to Malaysia in search of these basic rights.

Dr Aslam Abd Jalil, The International Institute of Public Policy & Management (INPUMA), University of Malaya

Dr Aslam discussed the various survival strategies of the Rohingya, many of whom take on 'odd' jobs. He highlighted that while religious solidarity is essential, its reliance could influence how the Rohingya are perceived in different countries. In Malaysia, however, religious solidarity is generally welcomed by the government, the public, NGOs, and politicians. The COVID-19 pandemic further drew attention to health concerns within the Rohingya community, and while there were calls for repatriation, humanitarian and religious considerations led to a more cautious approach.

Tuan Haji Azril Mohd Amin, Chairman of the Centre for Human Rights Research and Advocacy (CENTHRA)

Tuan Haji Azril emphasised the need to improve Malaysia's legal framework to ensure protection from discrimination, in line with the country's constitutional principles. He proposed that the Rohingya should be afforded brotherhood rights under Islam, noting Malaysia's unique position as a Muslim-majority nation. He suggested that Malaysia ratify the refugee convention, and CENTHRA was established partly to advocate for this move. By establishing proper legal structures, the Rohingya could eventually gain empowerment to rebuild their homeland. Tuan Haji Azril also highlighted that humanitarian aid and integration activities with local communities could strengthen the Rohingya's ability to contribute to their eventual repatriation.

Key Discussion Points and Participant Questions

The dialogue session highlighted several broader complexities surrounding the Rohingya issue. Participants raised concerns about the persistence of xenophobic sentiments, particularly in relation to public health fears and economic anxieties. Religious differences, such as those between the Hanafi and Shafi'i schools, were examined, with clarification that these differences are not a major issue in Malaysia. Speakers also addressed the Rohingya community's stance on the militant ARSA group, clarifying that many Rohingya see ARSA as an underground faction wrongly perceived by some as a legitimate means for fighting for their rights. This sentiment was accompanied

by calls for educational initiatives to dispel misconceptions and promote understanding within local and Rohingya communities alike.

Further challenges discussed included the inclusivity of dialogues, with participants noting that not all Rohingya are represented and that some negative internal elements continue to impede collective action. The effectiveness of the UNHCR's Refugee Status Determination (RSD) process was also discussed, with specific reference to challenges in registration protocols and access restrictions, which have led to gaps in service and support for Rohingya detainees.

Conclusion

The session provided valuable insights into the roles religion, religious leaders, and networks can play in enhancing solidarity with the Rohingya community. These discussions underscore the need to balance humanitarian, religious, and social considerations while addressing the legal and structural issues facing the Rohingya. Speakers and participants have engaged in meaningful dialogue, highlighting both the challenges and the promising initiatives that can build a more inclusive environment. Moving forward, these lessons offer a pathway for strengthening Malaysia's role in supporting refugees and fostering a society that embraces unity and respect for all.

DIALOGUE SESSION 2 : MIGRATION EXPERT WORKSHOP
Building Peace through Education and Dakwah – Role, Issue, and Challenge

Moderated by Dr Aizat Khairi, Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities,
Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM)

The second dialogue session of the Migration Expert Workshop, titled “Building Peace through Education and Dakwah – Role, Issue, and Challenge,” brought together educators, community leaders, and humanitarian organisation representatives to discuss the role of education and religious outreach (dakwah) in fostering peace among Rohingya refugees in Malaysia and within the host society. This session defined “peace” as a state of harmony, social cohesion, and absence of conflict, with a presence of justice and stability. Dakwah, seen as essential to peacebuilding, encourages dialogue, provides spiritual and emotional support, and helps individuals face communal challenges, while education contributes by instilling empathy, conflict resolution, and respect in the younger Rohingya generations. The following report summarises the speakers’ perspectives on the impact of these elements and the challenges they face.

Cikgu Husnah, Teacher at Rohingya Learning Centre, Ampang

Cikgu Husnah emphasised the significance of basic education for Rohingya refugees, particularly in literacy and essential life skills. She discussed efforts within her learning centre to prevent forced marriages by offering educational pathways that encourage self-empowerment. Her focus on primary education and foundational skills is intended to lay a groundwork for the Rohingya community’s sustainable development and adaptation in Malaysia. She highlighted that education not only provides knowledge but also fosters a sense of identity and self-worth among young Rohingya, which are crucial to promoting social cohesion and peaceful coexistence.

Ms Syedah Bi, Community Leader, Rohingya Women Development Network (RWDN)

Ms Syedah elaborated on her organisation’s focus on women’s development, providing training in practical skills like sewing, cooking, and basic literacy. These skills, she noted, are instrumental in building confidence and self-reliance among Rohingya women, many of whom have little or no formal education. She also stressed the importance of teaching principles of cleanliness, respect for neighbours, and maintaining harmonious relations within their communities, as these practices aid in the Rohingya’s assimilation and acceptance within

Malaysian society. Ms Syedah pointed out that the lack of educational opportunities for Rohingya in Myanmar poses challenges to their adaptation in Malaysia, making initiatives like RWDN essential for fostering peace and mutual understanding.

Dr Shahrizal Azwan bin Samsudin, Chief Executive Officer, Malaysian Relief Agency (MRA)

Dr Shahrizal explored the dual role of religion and politics in uniting or dividing communities. He explained how anti-Islamic sentiment and Myanmar's policies have systematically excluded the Rohingya, creating an atmosphere of hostility and discrimination. He called for unity based on Islamic principles of compassion and brotherhood as a means to overcome these divisive forces. Dr Shahrizal suggested that religious education, when oriented towards inclusive values, can act as a unifying force that mitigates prejudice and fosters a culture of acceptance and peace. He urged that both political and religious efforts align towards establishing solidarity with the Rohingya, advocating that Malaysian society play an active role in supporting their integration.

Mr Joshua Ericsson, Executive Director, HOST International

Mr Joshua Ericsson provided insights into the challenges Rohingya refugees face upon arriving in Malaysia, driven by the conflict in Myanmar and inadequate conditions in Bangladesh. He explained current efforts to alleviate pressure on urban areas like Kuala Lumpur and Selangor by distributing the Rohingya population across other states, such as Kelantan, Kedah, and Terengganu. Joshua underlined the critical role of education for the Rohingya community, viewing it as a means to address the injustices they face. He highlighted that educational programs not only empower the Rohingya but also contribute to a peaceful co-existence by providing them with the skills needed to integrate and contribute to Malaysian society.

Conclusion

The session concluded with a shared understanding of the transformative role education and dakwah can play in building a harmonious and inclusive environment for the Rohingya in Malaysia. The speakers highlighted that peace-building efforts must encompass both educational initiatives and religious outreach to foster empathy, conflict resolution, and mutual respect. Recognising the potential of religious networks and humanitarian organisations to support these efforts is crucial. Moving forward, a collaborative approach—integrating religious, educational, and community-based resources—will be

essential to creating a peaceful, cohesive environment that enables the Rohingya community to thrive and contributes positively to Malaysian society.

KEYNOTE ADDRESS BY YBHG. DATUK AHMAD AZAM AB RAHMAN

Commissioner to the independent Permanent Human Rights Commission (IPHRC) of Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC)

Title: How does religion teach us in fostering solidarity, peace, and an inclusive society?

The keynote address by YBhg. Datuk Ahmad Azam Ab Rahman, Commissioner to the Independent Permanent Human Rights Commission (IPHRC) of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), focused on “*How does religion teach us in fostering solidarity, peace, and an inclusive society?*” Datuk Ahmad Azam discussed the educational needs of the Rohingya community in Malaysia and highlighted the broader responsibilities of Malaysia within ASEAN regarding regional displacement issues.

Datuk Ahmad Azam noted that many Rohingya receive education in madrasahs, which often do not meet Malaysian or international standards. He explained the importance of improving educational offerings to better align with current needs, ensuring that the Rohingya community gains skills relevant to the Malaysian context. Additionally, he stressed that Malaysia, as the current ASEAN chair, should take active steps to address the Myanmar and Southern Thailand issues, which impact Rohingya displacement.

To enhance support for Rohingya refugees, Datuk Ahmad Azam recommended the establishment of a central coordinating body dedicated to managing their welfare. He observed that some Rohingya are reluctant to attend UNHCR schools, viewing them as Christian institutions, which limits their access to formal education. A centralised body could work to bridge this gap by addressing such cultural concerns and providing alternative educational options.

In conclusion, Datuk Ahmad Azam highlighted the role of Islamic teachings in fostering solidarity and inclusivity. He suggested that religious and community values can be instrumental in supporting the integration and well-being of refugees. His address called for Malaysia to lead in creating a cohesive, compassionate society that welcomes and supports the Rohingya community through improved education and coordinated care.

DIALOGUE SESSION 3 : MIGRATION EXPERT WORKSHOP

The Role of Religion and Religious Actors in Building a Stronger Community

Moderated by Dr Nik M. Hasif, Institute of Malaysian and International Studies (IKMAS), Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM)

The third dialogue session of the Migration Expert Workshop, titled *‘‘The Role of Religion and Religious Actors in Building a Stronger Community,’’* examined how religious values and actors contribute to strengthening the Rohingya community in Malaysia. This session defined a ‘‘stronger community’’ as one with high levels of trust, connection, social cohesion, and solidarity, both within the Rohingya population and between Rohingya refugees and their Malaysian hosts. Religion and religious leaders play a critical role in fostering this strength by gathering people, instilling shared values, and promoting community services.

Sheikh Ayatullah Noorul Bashar, Imam Masjid Nurul Islam

Sheikh Ayatullah began with a recitation of Du’a, setting a reflective tone for the session. He discussed the importance of religious guidance in building a united community, noting that Islam teaches values of compassion and solidarity which are essential for the Rohingya in overcoming their shared challenges. By fostering a sense of brotherhood and offering spiritual support, religious leaders can help the Rohingya maintain their identity and cohesion in Malaysia.

Ustaz Hilal, Representative of Rohingya Society Malaysia (RSM)

Ustaz Hilal expressed gratitude for being included as a Rohingya voice in the session. He highlighted the difficulties of supporting refugees with minimal educational background and underscored the critical role of Quranic education, which provides spiritual strength and resilience. Faith, he noted, offers comfort amid hardships, and he encouraged the Rohingya community to lean on their beliefs for emotional and social support, promoting peace and unity within the community.

Datin Nur Azlina Abdul Aziz, Executive Director of Persatuan Jaringan Islam Global Masa Depan

Datin Nur Azlina spoke on the structure of Rohingya colonies in Kajang, where children attend madrasahs and gradually integrate into formal schooling. She

observed that minor conflicts sometimes escalate into parental disputes, though there is a growing openness toward education within the community. Datin Nur Azlina also stressed the importance of foundational religious education and advised collaboration with authorities to address marriage registration issues, as fake certificates could lead to future lineage complications.

Pn. Roha Hassan, Pengurus Besar Operasi MyCARE

Puan Roha emphasised the importance of public understanding of refugee realities. She encouraged Malaysians to learn about refugee issues to combat negative perceptions and misinformation. Education, she argued, is vital for equipping refugees with life skills and for fostering generational change. By educating both the Rohingya and the Malaysian public, a more supportive and informed environment can be created.

Conclusion

The session highlighted the central role of religion and religious actors in supporting the Rohingya community in Malaysia. Speakers stressed the value of religious guidance, community education, and collaboration with local authorities as essential for building cohesion and understanding. This report summarises the key insights and recommendations shared, pointing to the need for a holistic approach that integrates spiritual, social, and educational support to foster a stronger, more inclusive community.