

## Securitising Irregular Migration, Refugees, and Potential Security Threats in Malaysia

Ravi Mahalingam<sup>1\*</sup> 

<sup>1</sup>Freelance Researcher, Malaysia.

Email: [ravimahalingam84@gmail.com](mailto:ravimahalingam84@gmail.com)

### CORRESPONDING

#### AUTHOR (\*):

Ravi Mahalingam  
([ravimahalingam84@gmail.com](mailto:ravimahalingam84@gmail.com))

### KEYWORDS:

Irregular migration  
Refugee  
Security  
Securitisation theory

### CITATION:

Ravi Mahalingam. (2022). Securitising Irregular Migration, Refugees, and Potential Security Threats in Malaysia. *Malaysian Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities (MJSSH)*, 7(8), e001683.  
<https://doi.org/10.47405/mjssh.v7i8.1683>

### ABSTRACT

This paper deals with the question of how the influx of irregular immigrants, particularly refugees, and their protracted stay in Malaysia has developed into a matter of security in the country. The fundamental objective of this paper is to analyse the potential threats often associated with the issue and the response from the Government of Malaysia. Qualitative data for this paper was obtained through open-source materials and semi-structured interviews with public officials from government enforcement agencies like the Royal Malaysia Police (RMP), the Immigration Department of Malaysia, and officers from the Ministry of Home Affairs. Besides, various reports from non-governmental organizations, international organizations, and news media helped to collate and provide a comprehensive analysis of the subject matter. This paper employed securitisation theory to explain how the issues related to the influx of refugees and their protracted stay in the country, especially during the Covid-19 situation, were transformed into security agenda by the securitising agents and the subsequent measures taken to combat the threat.

**Contribution/Originality:** This study is one of the very few research that have investigated irregular migration, particularly the refugee situation in Malaysia and its associated security threats. In addition, the study also contributed to the existing literature on securitisation. The holistic analysis of this study helped to identify the referent objects, the securitising actors, and the measures taken to securitise irregular migration as well as the protracted refugee situation in Malaysia.

## 1. Introduction

Irregular migration, or the irregular movement of people through international borders, is a major transnational issue that adversely affected many parts of the world, including Southeast Asia. Irregular migration flows have become increasingly mixed, whereby refugees and asylum seekers, move alongside economic migrants in search of protection and better livelihood. In general, refugees are considered as someone who is displaced, crosses international borders, and may not be able to return home due to war, violence, or fear of prosecution (Sainz-Pardo, 2002). It is also important to note that the movement

of refugees occurs against the backdrop of regional integration which creates a vacuum for irregular cross-border movement of people. Refugees, despite the protection granted by international law, are often regarded as irregular migrants in many countries, particularly Southeast Asia countries. Almost every country in Southeast Asia has a multifaceted relationship regarding refugee movement, simultaneously serving as a source, transit, and destination country.

Porous borders and huge labour opportunities in Malaysia are among the main factor that is often associated with the influx of refugees into the country. These irregular migrants are willing to face the risk associated with the difficult or unsafe journey for a better life and protection in Malaysia. Even though Malaysia is not a signatory to the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees and the 1967 Protocol, the country still shelters thousands of refugees on humanitarian grounds. [Ahmad, Rahim, and Mohamed \(2016\)](#) acknowledged that Malaysia is the highest net recipient of refugees amongst ASEAN states.

As of May 2022, there are about 182,960 asylum seekers and refugees registered with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in Malaysia. Of the figure, 157,040 asylum seekers and UNHCR cardholders are Myanmar citizens, with the Rohingya ethnicity being the most extensive composition of 104,330 people. The remaining individuals are some 25,920 refugees and asylum-seekers from 50 countries fleeing war and persecution, including some 6,700 Pakistanis, 3,770 Yemenis, 3,320 Syrians, 3,160 Somalis, 3,000 Afghans, 1,570 Sri Lankans, 1,200 Iraqis, 780 Palestinians, and others ([United National High Commissioner for Refugees, 2022](#)).

The huge number of refugees in Malaysia and the influx of refugees into the country, especially during the Covid-19 pandemic period, has caused a great security concern to the government. The presence of a large number of refugees in Malaysia is perceived as a threat to law and order, socio-economic, and security of the country in general. This concern has triggered the government to re-evaluate its response mechanisms to safeguard its people from the possible threat that may be caused by irregular migrants. Security concerns are therefore used to rationalize certain policies and measures taken to prevent the influx of irregular migrants as well as to manage the existing refugees in the country.

It is equally important to acknowledge that despite the scale and manifestation of the presence of irregular migrants, especially refugees, in Malaysia, the issue remains inadequately documented or researched, at least from the security perspective. Hence, the purpose of this paper is to examine the possible threats that may be caused by the refugees in the country as well as measures taken by the government to manage the issue using the securitisation theory. It is necessary to note that the management of refugees and ad-hoc policies have remained closely linked in Malaysia through securitisation. Securitisation is fundamentally a process in which securitizing actors or individuals with sufficient authority like the politicians or policymakers identify existential threats to the country and seek to implement extraordinary measures to counter the threats. Hence, understanding the process of securitizing issues related to refugees in Malaysia also helps in identifying the securitizing actors, the policy changes or extraordinary measures taken as well as the outcome of the action.

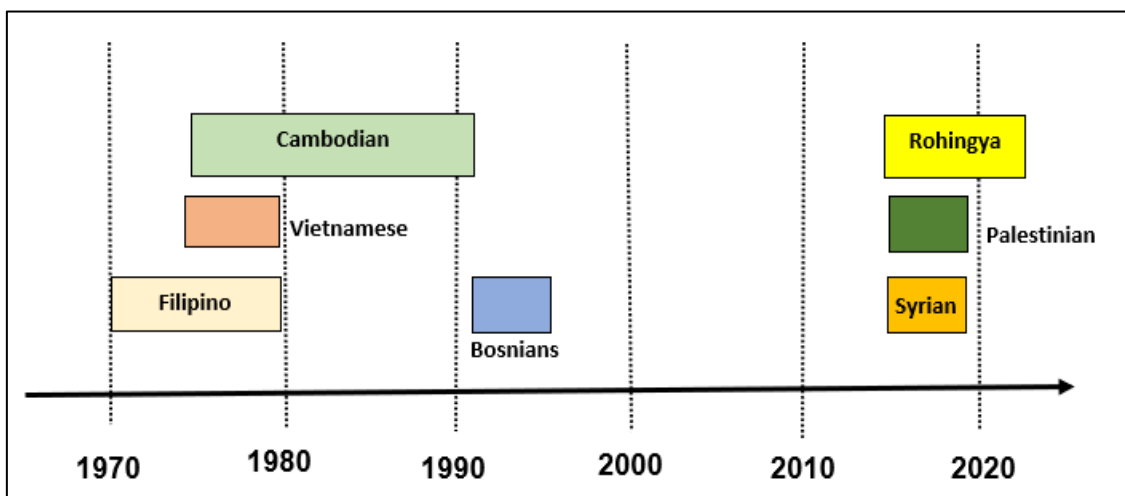
## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. The Management of Refugees in Malaysia

Since the 1970s, Malaysia has attracted a significant number of refugees from countries faced with conflict and strife. Whilst many are from the Southeast Asia region, Malaysia has also become a haven for refugees outside the region. Malaysia's first major experience with refugees and asylum seekers was after the Fall of Saigon in 1975 which eventuate influx of Vietnamese boat people into the country. Malaysia become a transit home for 252,390 Vietnamese refugees who were housed on Bidong Island, Terengganu for almost 10 years before moving to Sungai Besi Refugee Camp in Kuala Lumpur. All those refugees were eventually resettled to third countries or voluntarily repatriated to Vietnam through the office of the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR).

Besides Vietnamese refugees, Malaysia also became a sanctuary to Filipino Muslims, Cambodian Muslims, Bosnians, Palestinians, Syrians amongst others, and most recently Rohingyas from Rakhine State, Myanmar. It is estimated that Malaysia has become a transit for refugees from more than 50 countries. In regards to gender, most of the refugees consist of 67% male and 33% female. There are also some 46,570 children below the age of 18 (United National High Commissioner for Refugees, 2022). Figure 1 illustrates the flow of refugees into Malaysia from the 1970s to the 2020s.

Figure 1: The flow of refugees into Malaysia from the 1970s to the 2020s



The current National policy on “Refugees”, as outlined in the National Security Council (NSC) Directive No. 23, states that Malaysia is not a member state of the 1951 Convention on the Status of Refugees and the 1967 Protocol on the Status of Refugees. Due to the status, the UNHCR in Malaysia functions as the principal body in determining the status of refugees and providing international protection, while the International Organisation of Migration (IOM) assists in resettling refugees to their country of origin or third countries. Since 2008, the UNHCR in Malaysia has submitted 114,252 refugees for the resettlement process. Of the number, 90,625 submissions were accepted and resettled in countries such as Australia, Canada, the United States of America, the United Kingdom, Denmark, Japan, New Zealand, Sweden, and Norway.

On the other hand, it is imperative to note that the approach to handling refugees in Malaysia has considerably changed after the case of the Vietnamese. This can be evident in the case of Rohingya. Rohingya have faced a prolonged stay in the country since they began to arrive in the early 1990s. Since many of them are unable to return home or are even 'rejected' by participating countries in the resettlement program, they have no choice but continue to live in Malaysia. Anecdotal evidence shows that third generations of Rohingya are currently living in the country. Even though Rohingya are considered illegal immigrants under Malaysian law, however, they are tolerated by the majority of Muslim Malaysians and can access informal employment and health care. This has relatively substantiated their position compared to other refugees in the country.

It is somehow perplexing to acknowledge that policies and regulations on refugees in the country have been ad hoc because Malaysia is not a signatory of the refugee convention and there is no specific legislation on refugees per se. Moreover, Malaysia's Immigration Act 195/63 also does not have any provisions or references to refugees and asylum seekers. However, refugees registered with UNHCR generally enjoy privileges such as freedom of movement without restriction within the Peninsula of Malaysia, access to health facilities at government hospitals and clinics, and access to education at alternative learning centres run by UNCHR, refugee communities, and non-governmental organizations. At present, the government of Malaysia is studying the possibility of allowing refugees to work legally in the country as well as providing some 'de facto' social protection to them.

## 2.2. The Concept of Securitisation

The concept of securitisation in security studies describes the process where influential actors especially policymakers transform issues or threats into matters of security. In another word, the process of securitisation helps to identify who is the securitizing actors, what is the nature of the threat, and therefore the interests and intentions involved in the process (Floyd, 2020). According to Rychnovská (2014), the concept of securitisation has been a useful tool for researchers who wanted to challenge the notion of the objectivity of security threats. Hence, this aspect is useful for understanding the reasons why the protracted refugee situation in Malaysia could become a threat to national security.

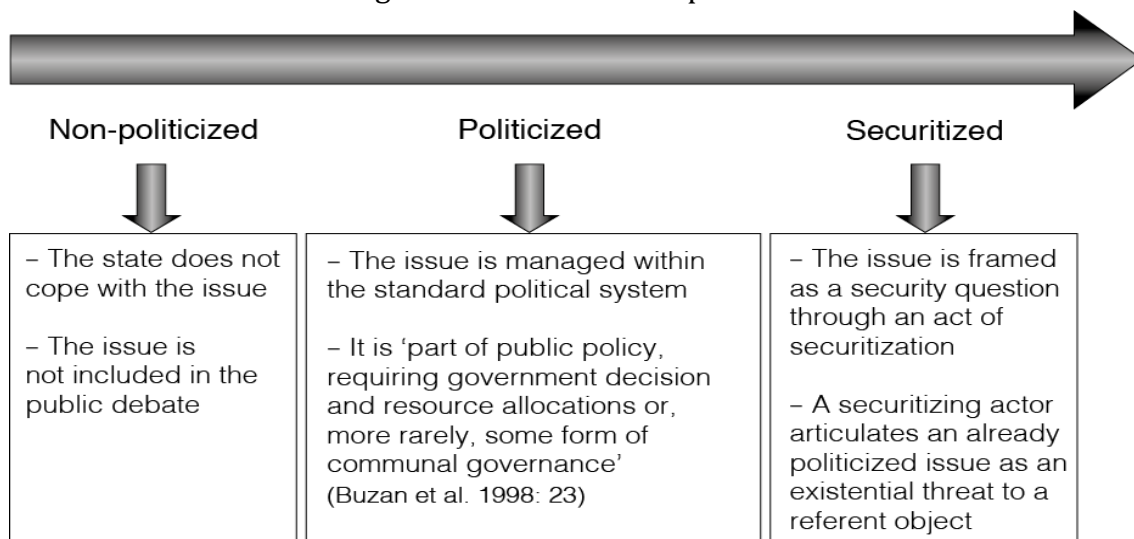
The concept of securitisation was first mooted by researchers in the 'Copenhagen School', a manifest of the Conflict and Peace Research Institute (COPRI) in Copenhagen. The Copenhagen School assumes security as a socially constructed idea (Buzan et al.,1998). It means any issues that are regarded as security concern does not exist on their own but are invented through human interaction and ideational discourses. The Copenhagen School proclaims that any public issue can be classified according to the level of emergency and state's action, namely non-politicized issue, politicized issue, and securitized issue. Emmers (2010) explained that any political issues are considered non-politicized when it carries less concern for the state's action and it is not included in the public debate. An issue becomes politicized if it carries more concern for the state's action and is manageable within the existing political system. A politicized issue can be considered part of public policy as it requires some form of governance and resource allocation from the state (Buzan et al.,1998). A politicized issue becomes securitized when it is framed as a security problem and requires immediate and extraordinary measures beyond the state's standard political procedures (Weaver, 1995). A politicized issue can be moved to a securitized issue through an act of 'securitisation'. The diagram below

shows the spectrum established by the school for a better understanding of the classification and movement of issues by the securitizing actors.

### 2.3. Securitisation Spectrum

According to [Emmers \(2010\)](#), the act of securitisation depends on a two-stage process to describe how and when an issue is moved from a politicized level to a securitized level as well as by whom. At the first stage of securitisation, government or non-government actors portray an already politicized issue as a security threat that needs to be managed with extraordinary measures. Sometimes, an issue might be exaggerated or hyperbolized to get the policymakers or other securitizing actors' priority attention on the matter. According to [Collins \(2005\)](#), the successful movement of an issue from a politicized level to a securitized level depends on the power and influence of the securitizing actors. In the second stage of securitisation, the securitizing actors need to convince relevant audiences such as political leaders, elected members of parliaments, bureaucrats, or a community about the danger or threat faced by a specific referent object. Only with the acknowledgment and acceptance of the audience, extraordinary measures can be imposed to manage the threat. [Figure 2](#) illustrates the two-stage process of securitisation.

Figure 2: Securitisation spectrum



Source: [Emmers \(2010:138\)](#)

An act of securitisation can either succeed or fail depending on the persuasiveness of the discourse by securitizing actors. However, [Emmers \(2010\)](#) stressed that a successful securitisation does not rely solely on the adoption of extraordinary measures, but sometimes simply on the acknowledgment of security threats by the audience. The core of a two-stage process of securitisation is a 'speech act'. The speech act is defined as the eloquent representation of a certain issue as an existential threat to security and in fact, considered a starting point in the process of securitisation ([Weaver, 1995](#)). In another word, speech informs and persuades a relevant audience about the reality and danger it has on society as well as the need to have an exceptional measure to address the so-defined danger.

### 3. Methodology

The research design for this project was qualitative in nature. This project took the form of exploratory research, which [Stebbins \(2001\)](#) note as an essential research method to analyse issues or matters that cannot be explained using controlled experiments like the irregular movement of migrants and refugees. This project employed a systematic collection and analysis of open-source materials which include primary sources like legislation materials and government reports, as well as secondary sources prepared by non-governmental organizations, international organizations, and academicians. The data and facts obtained from the open-source materials were further complemented and validated by information collected through semi-structured interviews with law enforcement personnel from the Royal Malaysia Police (RMP), Immigration Department of Malaysia (JIM), and officers from the Ministry of Home Affairs.

According to [Bennett and Elman \(2006\)](#), an exploratory case study design can provide a detailed analysis of an under-studied phenomenon or event to obtain a thorough understanding of it. Similarly, [Merriam \(2009\)](#) acknowledges that an exploratory case study is appropriate when the topic of interest has not been the subject of exhaustive research, as in the case of refugees and potential security threats in Malaysia. She further asserts that by examining a previously under-studied issue, one has the opportunity to search for relevant factors and provide a descriptive foundation for future research. For these reasons, an exploratory case study design was selected as the appropriate research strategy to use in this study. On the other hand, the selection of respondents was based on purposive and snowball sampling techniques. According to [Merriam \(1997\)](#), purposive and snowball sampling are appropriate techniques for exploratory research because they can help in the quest to obtain high-quality information.

### 4. Findings and Discussions

#### 4.1. Refugees and Potential Security Threats

Irregular and undocumented migrants are often represented as a problematic population, a representation that gives them an unfavourable slant. Due to their immigration status, they are frequently considered a national security threat. This prognostic security threat usually emerged through the commentaries of the elites such as political leaders, bureaucrats, members of civil societies as well as academicians, and news reports. In Malaysia, irregular and undocumented migrants, including refugees, have become the face of various security threats in the country. In particular, the protracted refugee situation in Malaysia has caused great concern to the policymakers, enforcement agencies, as well as the public in general. Refugees in Malaysia are commonly associated with social, economic, and internal security dilemmas for the country and it presents a predicament between its national interest and humanity.

Many refugees especially the Rohingya in Malaysia live in forms of illegal self-settlement and deplorable conditions. This may be because the existing law in the country does not allow them to work and they practically have to depend on humanitarian assistance from UNHCR or non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Due to these situations, they are often considered vulnerable and easy targets for illegal businesses, criminal networks, and religious fundamentalist groups. The following section of the paper will discuss the potential threats that may be caused by the refugees in Malaysia from the societal, economic, and internal security domains.

#### 4.1.1. Societal and Economic Security

Societal security is among the new security challenges that are often associated with the issues related to irregular migration and the protracted stay of refugees in the host countries like Malaysia. [Loescher \(1992\)](#) acknowledged that refugees can pose a serious threat to the social security of a host country in numerous ways. For instance, spreading through the local community, getting married to the locals, and gaining legal status through illegal means such as acquiring national identity cards, working permits, as well as passports. These acts are usually considered indicators of the socio-cultural threat to the host country. Malaysia is a multiracial country with a mix of Malay, Chinese, Indians, and various ethnicities of Sabah and Sarawak. Even though there is a huge divergence in terms of race and religion, however, Malaysians hold the same national identity and values. With the influx and protracted refugee situation in the country, many members of the public regard refugees as a societal threat as they are different in terms of language spoken, ideologies, and way of life.

Some believe that the societal fabric is at risk in Malaysia due to the presence of a large number of refugees. First, there is evidence that refugees are spread across the country. Based on the data obtained from the UNHCR website, refugees are scattered throughout the country and the majority of them live in Selangor, Kuala Lumpur, Penang, and Johor. Besides, most of them live side by side with local Malaysians since there are no specific camps for refugees per se. Moreover, refugees registered with UNHCR can move around the Peninsula of Malaysia without any restrictions which makes them fully mobile and volatile. Another cause of concern is marriage between refugees and local Malaysians. Under the Immigration Act 1959/63, refugees are not allowed to marry locals but there is evidence to prove otherwise ([Teoh & Cynthia, 2014](#)). Last but not least, there has been an accusation that refugees are getting national identity cards or known as MyKad as well as working permits through illegal means. For instance, based on observation and anecdotal evidence, there are many third and fourth-generation Rohingya refugees in Bukit Malut, Langkawi who has MyKad!

There is also a growing belief among analysts that the protracted refugee situation in Malaysia is causing negative disturbance to the local economies. [Loescher \(1992\)](#) argued that the influx of irregular migrants including refugees into a host country may rise economic tension and create an unemployment situation. In the context of Malaysia, locals fear that the refugees may create additional socio-economic pressure on the already heavily populated areas. The argument was centred on the claim that the penetration of refugees or other irregular migrants into the local job market may lead to further demographic inequalities and reduces employment opportunities for the local workforce. Furthermore, local complaints that refugees begin to operate businesses without licenses and use government land without permission for their own purposes ([Sukhani, 2020](#)). Since there are thousands of refugees who have lived in Malaysia for years, there is also distress that they would demand rights such as citizenship in the future.

#### 4.1.2. Internal Security

[Grizold \(1994\)](#) relates internal security to the threats to law and order from sources within a country. In this part, the paper analyses the possible threat to law and order that may be caused by the protracted refugee situation in Malaysia. First, there is evidence that some refugees are involved in drug trafficking in the country. One example is the case in Kedah where 5 Rohingya was arrested for drug trafficking offence ([Astro Awani, 2016](#)).

Based on the anecdotal evidence, it is claimed that some drug trafficking syndicates increasingly engage undocumented migrants and refugees in their illegal operations. Using refugees to traffic drugs is believed to be seen as a less risky way by the syndicates.

Besides drug trafficking, there are also an increasing number of reports associating refugees, especially Rohingya, with criminal activities like burglary and human trafficking. For instance, in 2020, the Royal Malaysia Police (RMP) arrested 3 Rohingya refugees for stealing in a house during the Movement Control Order (MCO) (Mamun, 2020). During the same period, RMP also arrested 5 other Rohingya for a similar offence. Moreover, the authority found that some members of the Rohingya community in Malaysia played a key role in the trafficking and smuggling of migrants into the country. It was evident when RMP arrested several Rohingya from 2019 to 2020 in connection to the crime (The Guardian, 2020; Nufael, 2019).

Another issue that raises concern about the Rohingya community in Malaysia is the possible infiltration of radical or extremist ideologies. Iman Research, a social and community think tank in Malaysia, reported that among the pull factors that drew Rohingya refugees in Malaysia towards violence and jihadism intention are feelings of frustration, distrust, anger, and alienation because of their uncertain status as well as the substandard livelihood in the country (Soo, 2020). They might be also influenced by the ideologies of the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA), an armed rebel group fighting for self-determination for the ethnic minority in Myanmar. Besides, there are also concerns about the possibility of segments of the Rohingya community in Malaysia coming under the radical influence of some religious extremist group that may already be operating in the country such as Jemaah Islamiyah or other groups that supports the self-proclaimed Islamic State (IS).

A respondent for this paper acknowledged that some members of the Rohingya community in the country are being 'radicalised' either by ARSA or other religious extremist groups through its online content and social media such as Facebook and YouTube. For instance, a YouTube channel called Rohingya Reality TV is claimed to propagate ARSA's ideologies besides teaching the Malay language to the community (Singh & Dass, 2022). On top of that, there are also claims that some radicalised sections of the refugees in Malaysia actively maintain their link with extremists in their home countries. Some radicalized Rohingya are accused of not only commiserating with their radical ideology but also actively providing resources for these extremists. For example, RMP reported that a Rohingya-based extortion syndicate in Malaysia has been channeling thousands of dollars to fund ARSA militants in Myanmar (Mustafa & Azmi, 2019).

#### **4.2. Securitisation of irregular migration & protracted refugee situation in Malaysia**

The securitisation of irregular migration has become a repetitive process in Malaysia since the 1990s. Irregular migration, particularly the movement of refugees into the country, is a complex social phenomenon that is influenced by many factors such as history, society, and politics. Domestic conflicts due to chauvinism and economic disparities are among the main factors that explain the movement of refugees of Rohingya ethnicity from Bangladesh to Malaysia as well as other neighbouring states. Rohingya are believed to leave Cox Bazaar, the largest refugee settlement in the world, for other countries like Malaysia in the hope to escape violence, persecution, and finding a better livelihood. However, due to restrictive immigration policies and lack of legal immigration

opportunities, Rohingya often resort to illegal means such as paying human smugglers to transport them to their preferred destination.

Unfortunately, the immigration law in Malaysia regards any irregular movement of people, even refugees, into the country as a threat to its sovereignty. Moreover, the influx of refugees during the covid-19 situation was perceived to undermine not only national security but also human security. It can also have a cynical impact on the fabric of society and its economic welfare by affecting social order in the country. This may be because there are thousands of Rohingya already taking shelter in Malaysia for a protracted period. In addition to being censured for contributing to a rise in social issues and crime, the Rohingya community is also accused of taking away job opportunities from locals. Due to their immigration status, refugees and other undocumented migrants are usually regarded as cheap and low-skilled labours in Malaysia.

The existing policy on refugees in the country states that Malaysia is not a member state of the 1951 Convention on the Status of Refugees and the 1967 Protocol on the Status of Refugees. However, on humanitarian grounds, the Government of Malaysia has granted permission to illegal immigrants holding UNHCR cards to stay temporarily in the country before being resettled to a Third Country. Unfortunately, due to some political and technical reasons, many of them are still stranded in the country even after years. As a result, the Government of Malaysia constantly reviews measures and initiatives as part of its securitisation mechanism to improve the management of refugees in the country without compromising the national interest and security. For instance, the Ministry of Home Affairs is currently implementing the Rohingya UNHCR Cardholder Pilot Project, which is aimed to allow refugees to work in the plantation and manufacturing sectors.

The Government of Malaysia is fully aware that the protracted refugee situation in the country may cause possible social, economic, and internal security threats. Hence, the government has equipped itself with several preventive legislations. Besides the Penal Code, it has a special Act, namely the Prevention of Crime Act (POCA) and the *Security Offences (Special Measures) Act 2012* as means to monitor and neutralise any possible threats to the country. Additionally, the government also uses the 'suppression technique' as one of its mechanisms to counter possible security threats, even from the refugee community in the country. The 'suppression technique' is a subtle and effective method to engage certain individuals into renouncing their activities that are deemed detrimental to national security (Hamidi, 2016). The technique involves monitoring and executing engagement programmes designed to win the hearts and souls of the target individuals to neutralise or deradicalise them.

On the other hand, the handling of a mass influx of Rohingya by the Government of Malaysia in 2020 represents a compelling case of securitisation in the country. Despite stringent policies implemented since the 1990s, the issue of irregular migration, particularly involving the movement of refugees, has been a continuous concern for the government, especially during the beginning of the Covid-19 situation. The year 2020 turned out to be an unprecedented year for the whole world as nations struggled to manage and contain the spread of the Covid-19 virus, which wreaked havoc on the way of life for governments and people alike. The Malaysian Prime Minister, who was also the Senior Minister (Security Cluster) at the time, and Minister of Home Affairs transformed the issue of irregular migration into a matter of health as well as human security. The irregular movement of immigrants including refugees was also described as a threat to the national sovereignty and territorial integrity of the state.

Despite some domestic debates and criticism, particularly from human rights groups, the majority of the public accepted the notion set forward by the securitising agents who are in this case, the Senior Minister (Security Cluster) and Minister of Home Affairs. Based on the information obtained, the study suggests that the Covid-19 situation has increased stigma and prejudice against irregular immigrants including refugees who are perceived as high-risk groups. Subsequently, the Government of Malaysia adopted and implemented a series of extraordinary measures to combat the irregular movement of immigrants into the country. On 18 March 2020, Malaysia implemented the Movement Control Order (MCO) to control the outbreak in the country. The MCO stipulates the restriction of movement and activities as stated in the Prevention and Control of Infectious Diseases Act 1988 and the Police Act 1967, and restriction on entry of any foreigner into the country to prevent the introduction of new clusters.

In May 2020, the Government of Malaysia established the National Task Force (NTF), an entity that was tasked to coordinate various enforcement agencies like the Malaysian Armed Forces, Royal Malaysia Police, Malaysian Maritime Enforcement Agency, Malaysian Civil Defence Force, Malaysian Immigration Department, and Malaysian Volunteer Department in strengthening the border security. NTF was instrumental in the successful implementation of special operations nicknamed *Ops Benteng* and *Ops Pintas* that aimed to suppress the irregular movement of immigrants into the country. From May 2020 to September 2021, NTF has detained more than 15,754 illegal immigrants and 781 smugglers and eventually charged them for various offenses under the Immigration Act as well as the Anti-Trafficking in Persons and Anti-Smuggling of Migrants Act ([Sinar Harian, 2021](#)). At the same time, NTF has also stopped more than 200 vessels and boats from entering Malaysian waters.

## 5. Conclusion

The findings of this study suggest that the securitisation of irregular migration and the protracted refugee situation in Malaysia is unavoidable, especially during the Covid-19 pandemic period. The referent objects in this case study are national and human security. Hence, the debate about the influx of irregular migrants into Malaysia as well as the protracted refugee situation in the country was largely focused on describing refugees and other illegal immigrants in the country as a potential threat to the well-being of the society. This study also suggests that the Senior Minister (Security Cluster) and the Minister of Home Affairs assumed the role of securitizing actors who constructed the idea that the influx of refugees, particularly at the point of the pandemic, was a security threat to the nation. As a result, the government has adopted and implemented a series of measures to reduce the movement of irregular immigrants into the country. Among the extraordinary measures taken was the formation of the National Task Force (NTF) to tighten immigration controls at the borders to prevent both illegal entry of migrants as well as the spread of Covid-19 in Malaysia. With the asset and involvement of personnel from various enforcement agencies, it was clear that Malaysia attempts to implement new measures to address the illegal influx of migrants as part of its pandemic response. Last but not least, this study also suggests that the government's response has succeeded in its objective to securitize irregular movement of immigrants into the country. The establishment of NTF and its special enforcement operation nicknamed *Ops Benteng* and *Ops Pintas* has managed to suppress the inflow of illegal migrants into the country.

## Funding

This study was conducted on a freelance basis/self-interest. No funding was received.

## Conflict of Interests

The author reported no conflicts of interest for this work and declare that there is no potential conflict of interest with respect to the research, authorship, or publication of this article.

## References

- Ahmad, A.A., Rahim, Z., & Mohamed, A. M. H. (2016). The refugee crisis in Southeast Asia: The Malaysian experience. *International Journal of Novel Research in Humanity and Social Sciences*, 3(6), 80-90.
- Astro Awani. (2016, December 8). Five Rohingya refugees were arrested for alleged drug trafficking. Retrieved July 2, 2022, from <https://www.astroawani.com/berita-malaysia/five-rohingya-refugees-arrested-alleged-drug-trafficking-125053>.
- Bennett, A., & Elman, C. (2006). Qualitative research: Recent developments in case study methods. *Annual Review of Political Science*, 9, 455–476.
- Buzan, B., Wæver, O., & Wilde, J. D. (1998). *Security: A New Framework for Analysis*. Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers.
- Collins, A. (2005). Securitisation, Frankenstein's Monster and Malaysian Education. *The Pacific Review*, 18(4), 567-588.
- Emmers, R. (2010). Securitisation. In A. Collins (Ed.), *Contemporary Security Studies* (136-151). New York: Oxford University Press.
- Floyd, R. (2020). Securitisation and the function of functional actors. *Critical Studies on Security*, 9(2), 81-97.
- Grizold, A. (1994). The concept of national security in the contemporary world. *International Journal on World Peace*, 11(3), 37-53.
- Hamidi, A. Z. (2016). Malaysia's policy on counter-terrorism and radicalisation strategy. *Journal of Public Security and Safety*, 6(2), 1-19.
- Loescher, G. (1992). Strategic Consequences of Refugee Movements. *The Adelphi Papers*, 32(268), 41-55.
- Mamun, A. (2020, July 9). 3 Rohingyas remanded in Malaysia for stealing. Probashirdiganta. Retrieved July 7, 2022, from <https://www.probashirdiganta.com/en/news/3-rohingyas-remanded-in-malaysia-for-stealing>.
- Merriam, S. B. (2009). *Qualitative research: A guide to design and implementation*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Merriam, S. B. (1997). *Qualitative research and case study applications in education: Revised and expanded from case study research in education*. Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons.
- Mustafa, M. & Azmi, H. (2019, July 22). Malaysia Police: Rohingya Extortion Syndicate Funds Myanmar Rebels. *Benar News*. Retrieved July 14, 2022, from <https://www.benarnews.org/english/news/malaysian/extortion-syndicate-07222019142238.html>.
- Nufael, A. (2019, Mac 10). Malaysia Police Arrest 94 Linked to Human Smuggling Ring. *Benar News*. Retrieved June 25, 2022, from <https://www.benarnews.org/english/news/malaysian/trafficking-syndicate-10032019170233.html>.

- Rychnovská, D. (2014). Securitization and the Power of Threat Framing. *Perspectives: Review of International Affairs*, 22(2), 9-31.
- Sainz-Pardo, P. V. (2002). The Contemporary Relevance of the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees. *The International Journal of Human*, 6(2), 23-34.
- Sinar Harian. (2021, September 9). Ops Benteng: Lebih 15,000 PATI ditahan sejak Mei 2020. Retrieved July 13, 2022, from <https://www.sinarharian.com.my/article/160453/BERITA/Semasa/Ops-Benteng-Lebih-15000-PATI-ditahan-sejak-Mei-2020>.
- Singh, J. & Dass, R. (2022, April 13). Rohingya Militant Group Targeting Malaysia-Based Refugees with Online Campaign. *The Diplomat*. Retrieved July 10, 2022, from <https://thediplomat.com/2022/04/rohingya-militant-group-targeting-malaysia-based-refugees-with-online-campaign/>.
- Soo, W. J. (2020, Jun 20). Rohingya refugees less likely to be radicalised, but violent tendencies exist, says think tank. *Malay Mail*. Retrieved July 2, 2022, from <https://www.malaymail.com/news/malaysia/2020/06/20/rohingya-refugees-less-likely-to-be-radicalised-but-violent-tendencies-exis/1877164>.
- Stebbins, R. A. (2001). *Exploratory research in the social sciences*. Thousand Oaks, CL: Sage Publications.
- Sukhani, P. (2020, July 10). The Shifting Politics of Rohingya Refugees in Malaysia. *The Diplomat*. Retrieved July 14, 2022, from <https://thediplomat.com/2020/07/the-shifting-politics-of-rohingya-refugees-in-malaysia/>.
- Teoh, E. S., & Cynthia, N. (2014, June 12). Married to a refugee. *Astro Awani*. Retrieved July 3, 2022, from <https://www.astroawani.com/berita-malaysia/married-refugee-36185>.
- The Guardian. (2020, April 21). Malaysia arrests Rohingya in trafficking crackdown. Retrieved July 11, 2022, from <https://guardian.ng/news/world/malaysia-arrests-rohingya-in-trafficking-crackdown/>.
- United National High Commissioner for Refugees. (2022, June 16). *Figures at a glance in Malaysia*. Retrieved July 2, 2022, from <https://www.unhcr.org/en-my/figures-at-a-glance-in-malaysia.html>.
- Weaver, O. (1995). 'Securitization and De-securitization. In R. Lipschutz (Ed.), *Security* (pp. 46-87). New York: Columbia University Press.