



## ROHINGYA COMMUNITY IN KELANTAN: NATIONAL SECURITY CONCERNS AND LOCAL PERCEPTIONS

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### Abstract:

The presence of the Rohingya ethnic community in local settlements, particularly in the eastern coastal states, has elicited a range of apprehensions among the local populace. Kampung Peringat, Melor and Kota Bharu are among the primary locations for the settlement of the Rohingya ethnic community in Kelantan. Initially consisting of just a few individuals, the Rohingya population has increased significantly, now numbering in the thousands as illegal immigrants in the region. This research uses a qualitative approach, employing data gathered from both primary and secondary sources. Data is collected through interviews and observations within relevant domains. Secondary data is drawn from empirical sources, including dissertations, academic journals, and online databases. This research encompasses three primary objectives: 1) to examine the implications of the influx of the Rohingya ethnic community in Kelantan; 2) to assess the management and security protocols in response to the arrival of Rohingya ethnic refugees in Kelantan; and 3) to evaluate the effectiveness of governmental policies aimed at managing and regulating the presence of the Rohingya ethnic community in Kelantan. The findings of this study indicate that 1) the presence of this community has given rise to a range of social, economic, and security challenges, such as increased competition in the job market, greater use of public facilities, and negative perceptions regarding national security; 2) the management and security measures necessitated by the influx of Rohingya refugees in Kelantan have not been effectively implemented; and 3) the current governmental strategies for managing Rohingya refugees are viewed as inadequate, with lax enforcement heightening the concerns of the local populace. This study advocates for the government to implement more effective actions in the management of Rohingya refugees, thus safeguarding the well-being and security of Malaysians.

### Keywords:

Community, Kelantan, Illegal Immigrant, National Security, Rohingya

## Introduction

The continuous persecution of the Rohingya has forced thousands to escape to neighbouring countries in search of safety. Since Myanmar's independence in 1948, the number of Rohingya refugees has grown, particularly following military operations that persecuted the minority (Doctors Without Borders, 2019). This exodus occurred in 1978, 1990-1991, 2012-2013, 2015, and 2016, peaking in August 2017, as a result of genocide, war crimes and crimes against humanity committed by the Myanmar military regime. As a result, nearly 80% of the Rohingya people now live in a diaspora, including in Malaysia.

Several factors influence the selection of Malaysia as a transit country for Rohingya refugees and asylum seekers in the region. According to Andika (2019), three main factors influence Rohingya refugees to choose Malaysia as their preferred destination. First, the factor of Malaysia as an Islamic country. Second, they already have family members in Malaysia. Third, the factor of easily finding a job. The influx of ethnic Rohingya into Malaysia is also driven by the attraction of smuggling operators presenting appealing routes and the open borders of Malaysia that enable unauthorised access (Hairunnisa, 2025).

At the end of November 2024, approximately 111,410 Rohingya refugees and asylum seekers were registered with the UNHCR in Malaysia as of which accounts for 58% of the total refugee population in the country (UNHCR, 2025). Although a significant number of them possess UNHCR cards, this status only grants them international recognition as refugees not national recognition. The 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees and the 1967 Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees, which are the primary instruments in international refugee law were not signed by Malaysia. In this regard, Malaysia is not legally obligated to acknowledge or provide refugees with specific rights, including access to health facilities, education, and employment. In contrast, Malaysia's immigration laws classify refugees as illegal immigrants (Hairunnisa, 2021).

Initially, the presence of the Rohingya in the region was defined by small clusters comprising fewer than 10 individuals. The successful escape and subsequent establishment of a better life by a group of Rohingya ethnic individuals in their destination country served as a compelling example for other groups remaining in Myanmar (Nor Fazlina & Mohd Farid, 2024). The increase in the Rohingya ethnic group's number can also be caused to the government's warm disposition towards the refugees (Azharudin & Azlinariah, 2012). They were also allowed to navigate without the necessity of establishing residence in a designated settlement (Mohd Sophian, 2024; Ruhisham, 2025). Within a short span of years, their population surged significantly in Malaysia, resulting in the establishment of colonies across diverse regions of the country, including the Klang Valley, Penang, Negeri Sembilan, Johor, Kuala Terengganu, and Kelantan.

In recent years, the increasing number of Rohingya ethnic communities in Kelantan has attracted the attention of the community and local authorities. The state, located on the East Coast of Peninsular Malaysia, has now become one of the focal locations for Rohingya refugees to reside informally. According to Mohd Khairul (2025), among the Rohingya settlements in Kelantan are the Ketereh, Kok Lanas and Melor areas. Factors such as lower cost of living, existing community networks, and job opportunities in the informal sector have attracted the presence of these refugees. Their increasingly significant presence raises various questions about their legal status, social integration and impact on the local community. Therefore, this

study aims to examine the acceptance and perception of residents in Kelantan towards Rohingya ethnic refugees on national security.

### Methodology

This study uses qualitative methods. Qualitative methods are methods of collecting research data using various sources. Qualitative methods have the advantages and strengths of providing detailed and in-depth explanations of problems through reference to various research sources, such as interview processes and observations, where researchers must be present in the field to obtain data directly (Merriam, 2009). Two types of sources are focused on obtaining research information: primary data and secondary data. Focus group discussion (FGD) and interview methods were conducted to obtain primary data in this study.

Hennink (2013) defines FGD as a method of collecting information through communication in a group formed based on a topic determined by the researcher. Nyumba et al. (2018) explain that FGD is an interview conducted in a small group that allows researchers to obtain multiple views simultaneously. Meanwhile, Barbour (2021) suggests that this method be combined with qualitative interviews to produce more in-depth, accurate and empirical research findings. This study was divided into three focus groups, namely members of the security forces consisting of members of the Malaysian Maritime Enforcement Agency (MMEA), General Operations Force (GOF), Border Regiment (RS), Royal Ranger Regiment, Immigration Department of Malaysia (JIM), residents and the Rohingya refugee community in Malaysia.

Interview sessions with informants were conducted face-to-face and virtually. The face-to-face interview method has the advantage because it allows researchers to learn and experience the experiences of respondents described by them during the interview process, such as feelings (sad, angry, happy), actions, events, and gain new knowledge that may not be available through literature (Muthiah, 2008). Nonetheless, the face-to-face interview method presents drawbacks, as it necessitates considerable time and financial resources for execution, along with challenges in identifying appropriate and reliable informants appropriate to the area of focus. Virtual interviews were undertaken for informants unable to participate in person owing to time constraints or geographical distance, and used email or internet video conferencing. There were 35 informants interviewed in this study. Informants include an enforcement officer, a village head, academics, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and a Rohingya community leader

Secondary data is classified into two categories: printed and non-printed materials. The collection of printed secondary data is carried out through library research. This method plays a crucial role in aiding researchers in obtaining and enhancing the information necessary to support these studies. Secondary data of non-print materials, including electronic books, electronic magazines and journal articles, are obtained by exploring web operator sites such as Google Scholar. The Police Journal: Theory, Practice and Principles, Journal of International Relations and Strategic University of Malaya, Journal of International Studies, Universiti Utara Malaysia, and Zulfaqar Journal, Universiti Pertahanan Nasional Malaysia are among the reference journals.

### National Security Concept

The concept of "national security" originates from the 1648 Treaty of Westphalia, which established the principle of a sovereign state governed by a head of state, thus creating a new global framework for nation-states. In the current period of globalisation, numerous experts

concur that security is a "contested concept", as it has been criticised for its restrictive definition and ethnocentric bias. Countless scholars, including Buzan, Lippmann, and Wolfers, have articulated the notion of security. Buzan adopts a comprehensive perspective on security, emphasising many levels and sectors (Stone, 2009). In his paper "New Patterns of Global Security in the Twenty-First Century", Buzan examines how the concept of security includes not only military elements but also environmental, social, political, and economic concerns (Buzan, 1991).

Buzan (1983) identifies five fundamental perspectives of security: military, political, economic, social, and environmental. These aspects are interrelated and do not function independently, forming a complex network of relationships. The five fundamentals are inherently interconnected. National security, within the framework of the international system, refers to the capacity of states and societies to preserve their functional independence and integrity. Buzan identifies military security as the initial fundamental perspective, emphasising the role of force and its potential impact on all state components. Military threats can vary in significance regarding security. Buzan identifies political security as the second fundamental perspective of security. Political security may manifest as ideological competition or assaults on the state. Such threats represent a persistent concern for a state, albeit being more complex and challenging to identify compared to military threats.

Political security refers to the mechanisms through which governmental institutions maintain the integrity of their nation under legal frameworks and constitutional provisions. Governments possessing a robust administrative framework are equipped to address security threats, whether domestic or external, by enforcing legal systems and implementing national security policies designed to uphold the legitimacy of political institutions and governance. Political security is understood as a threat aimed at exerting pressure on governmental authority or policies. This threat manifests through actions intended to overthrow the government, such as revolutions or the establishment of anti-government movements. These actions can undermine the country's political, administrative, and military capabilities, potentially leading to its collapse (Buzan et al., 1998). Governments characterised by political stability derive significant legitimacy from the populace, which is rooted in the active participation of citizens in selecting their leaders through a legitimate electoral process. When the government attains legitimacy from the populace, compliance with its laws and regulations is likely to follow. Buzan emphasised that political ideology differences persist within any nation, potentially threatening national security. Such ideological disparities may incite radical and fanatical sentiments among the populace, creating opportunities for exploitation by certain factions aiming to destabilise the current administrative system (Harrison, 2009).

Buzan defines the concept of economic security as closely related to military security because financial limitations and constraints make military security dependent on economic security. Meanwhile, social security can be defined as a system of balance and identity prevalent in many countries worldwide. Social security, concerning culture and identity, is intrinsically connected to military and political security. According to Buzan, environmental security is particularly contentious compared to other security perspectives, as it appears unmanageable and poses a global threat with extensive repercussions. This study focuses on economic security, social security and political security.

## Findings

The results of this study discuss three main national security issues related to the Rohingya ethnic community in Kelantan, as follows:

### *Social Security*

The presence of the Rohingya ethnic group in Kelantan is increasingly worrying the local community. The Rohingya community began settling in Kampung Melor Lama over a decade ago, with an initial population of no fewer than five individuals. All settlements in Kampung Melor Lama, Kampung Kubang Tin and Kampung Padang Kala have Rohingya settlement communities. Their numbers have increased significantly in a short time, with some claiming it has reached thousands (Syaherah, 2024a).

This sudden increase has led to the establishment of a large Rohingya community in the region, which has created a perception among the local population that their area is being "colonised" (Nur Firdaus, 2025). These concerns arise not only from the growing population but are also closely related to security issues. Furthermore, there are allegations that rice fields on the outskirts of villages have been turned into informal settlements, where some Rohingya residents engage in illegal activities such as gambling, cockfighting, and karaoke (Syaherah, 2024a). This situation disrupts public order and threatens the social harmony and cultural values of the local community.

Residents have observed that some Rohingya arrive in this country as married couples and remain for an extended period, establishing families and descendants in Malaysia. Indeed, some couples marry in the country, where it is claimed that the wedding ceremony is conducted by individuals acting as a *tok kadi*. In certain instances, they invite villagers to partake in feasts and employ locals for food preparation, signifying social engagement with the local population. When enquired about their immigration status into Malaysia, the majority indicated that they arrived legally by possessing a United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) card (Ahmad Faris, 2025). Reports indicate that the Rohingya community is engaged in illegal activities and has confronted the local population, raising concerns regarding security and public order (Rushisham, 2025).

Crime statistics concerning the Rohingya ethnic community in Kelantan reveal a troubling increase (Ahmad Faris, 2025). In 2023, there were 56 arrests related to various criminal incidents involving the Rohingya, compared to 35 arrests in 2022. The highest number of recorded offences was housebreaking incidents under Section 457 of the Penal Code and cases of theft or embezzlement under Section 379 of the Penal Code, each comprising 11 instances. In the Kota Bharu district, 16 crime reports were recorded regarding this ethnic group, consisting of seven cases of theft and embezzlement, two cases of cable theft, and two violations of Section 4A(a) of the Open Gambling Houses Act 1953. In addition, one case of serious injury, one case of kidnapping and one case of murder. Crimes occurred mainly in the Melor and Ketereh areas (Syaherah, 2024b). Table 1 shows several media reports of crimes committed by the Rohingya in Kelantan.

**Table 1: Media Coverage of Crimes Committed by the Rohingya in Kelantan**

Date	Media Agencies	News Headlines
February 19, 2025	New Straits Times	Rohingya imam charged with sexually abusing boy at Kelantan mosque.
September 23, 2024	Utusan Malaysia	Rape, murder, Rohingya sentenced to 24 years jail, four strokes of the rotan.
February 28, 2024	Berita Harian	Immigration Dept busts 'Ali Rohingya' human trafficking gang.
January 22, 2024	Harian Metro	Rohingya get married using their <i>tok kadi</i>
October 18, 2023	New Straits Times	Rohingya man was stabbed more than 40 times due to jealousy.

Source: Researcher

Apart from being involved in criminal cases, the Rohingya in Kelantan have also been detected committing various offences related to road laws. The Rohingya mostly constitute the majority of illegal immigrants who drive local vehicles without licences, particularly in Kota Bharu (Siti Rohana, 2023). Most of them have been detected using vehicles without a valid licence and without road tax and insurance, thus violating basic regulations under the Road Transport Act 1987. According to the Road Transport Department (RTD), driving licenses issued by the UNHCR are not recognised on a local level. This implies that, under the Road Transport Act 1987, these licenses are not valid for any vehicle in the country (Nicholas, 2020). UNHCR cardholders lack legal rights, status, and a foundation to make any demands of the local government (UNHCR, 2020). The Royal Malaysian Police also issued a severe warning to the local populace, cautioning them not to permit any illegal immigrants to operate their vehicles. This is because they are responsible for any accidents or traffic violations that may occur while using the vehicle.

Another significant complaint from the local community regarding the Rohingya refugee community pertains to their perceived disregard for cleanliness, particularly in residential areas. Residents who live next to this community have expressed their discomfort with the level of cleanliness in the Rohingya living environment, which is found to be poorly maintained (Hudzaifah, 2025). This issue has also caused tension between the local community and the Rohingya ethnic group, as it is seen as a form of failure to adapt to the values of cleanliness that are part of the local community's culture (Nur Firdaus, 2025).

### ***Economic Security***

The Rohingya community in Kelantan engages in several informal economic activities to support their daily lives. Despite being classified as illegal immigrants and without legal documentation, they continue to pursue job opportunities in fields that do not necessitate formal qualifications or legal verification. Among the main activities they engage in are working as manual labourers on construction sites, collecting and selling scrap metal (Halim, 2024). However, because they are not subject to business licences or tax laws, their participation in this economic activity frequently leads to conflict when there is unfair competition with the local populace, particularly when they charge lower prices. The local community is concerned about this issue because they believe it threatens their work options and revenue sources (Siti Munirah, 2025).

Meanwhile, the Rohingya who have lived in Kelantan for seven years make a living by selling scrap metal. He uses a tricycle to do this informal work to support his family. He engages in this business secretly to avoid detection by the authorities, as his refugee status prevents him from working legally in the country. He claims that his daily salary of between RM40 and RM60 is enough to support his family (Syaherah, 2024a). According to Mustapha (2025), the Rohingya, who have historically earned their livelihood through scrap metal collection, have transitioned from using tricycles to lorries. They possess expertise in purchasing and selling scrap metal, encompassing the prices provided. Locals are employed as Rohingya lorry drivers, earning approximately RM100 daily.

In some areas, such as Kampung Melor Lama, there are also a few individuals in this community who run small businesses, such as opening stalls. There are Rohingya who have lived in Kelantan for over two decades, running small businesses such as opening stalls and are skilled in preparing local food such as *roti canai* (Ahmad Faris, 2025). Residents have expressed concern regarding the possibility that certain individuals may be conducting businesses unlawfully by utilising licenses that belong to local individuals, a practice referred to as the Ali Baba system. In this situation, individuals in the local community obtain business licences under their names, while the actual operations of these businesses are conducted solely by Rohingya individuals. This practice contravenes local authority regulations and prompts a critical examination of the transparency in business regulation, as well as the equity afforded to law-abiding local traders. This situation highlights the pressing necessity for enhanced enforcement and more defined policies concerning the participation of refugees in Malaysia's informal economy, particularly in regions like Kelantan, where there has been a notable rise in the Rohingya community (Mohd Sophian, 2024).

### ***Political Security***

The influx of Rohingya refugees in Kelantan brings with it social and economic challenges, while also raising important questions regarding political security. Their growing presence has heightened concerns within local communities about the potential for demographic shifts that might threaten long-term political stability. Concerns emerge when the refugee community, even without citizenship status, is perceived as able to create significant community groups in terms of numbers and the spread of foreign cultures that may not align with national identity (Halim, 2024).

Rohingya refugees are alleged to have fake identity documents (MyKads) and have misused their UNHCR cards, raising doubts about the legitimacy of the country's administrative structure and border security. It is believed that Rohingya refugees have fraudulent identity documents such as MyKad, Malaysian passports and UNHCR cards. This raises major issues about the legality of the administrative structure of the country as well as the effectiveness of the measures that are in place to secure the borders. There are significant flaws in the control system at the country's entry points, particularly in high-risk border areas such as the Kelantan-Thailand border (Rushisham, 2025). The fact that some of these refugees were able to enter the country without going through the legal immigration screening process and that they obtained identity documents illegally is evidence of the fact that these flaws exist. These breaches at the land and sea borders have created an environment that is conducive to people smuggling activities that are orchestrated by transnational syndicates.

As a result, these breaches pose a threat to the security of the region and undermine the sovereignty of the nation. Furthermore, because there is no integrated biometric and tracking system amongst the agencies that are responsible for border security, it is impossible for refugees who are not formally recorded to be tracked and to travel freely within the country. In this context, the misuse of identity documents not only poses a challenge to public governance but also raises threats to national security, including the likelihood of elements of extremism or cross-border criminality invading the country (Halim, 2024).

### **Recommendation**

This study recommends that the government take more effective action in managing Rohingya illegal immigrants to ensure the well-being and security of Malaysians. Several actions that may be implemented include:

#### ***Law Enforcement***

The influx of Rohingya communities in Kelantan necessitates a stricter law enforcement strategy to guarantee that their management is conducted in a more organised and regulated manner. Rohingya who breach regulations should face suitable consequences, particularly concerning the possession of valid travel documents, unauthorised residence, and participation in criminal activities like smuggling, human trafficking, and the misuse of identification documents.

In order to comprehensively address this issue in Kelantan, it is necessary to improve the collaboration between enforcement agencies, including the Immigration Department of Malaysia, the Royal Malaysian Police, the National Security Council, and the Ministry of Home Affairs. Furthermore, it is crucial to collaborate with international agencies, including the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and non-governmental organisations (NGOs), to ensure that actions against undocumented refugees are coordinated. Refugees who violate regulations must be subjected to legal action. Authorities can monitor refugees who engage in unlawful activities through the implementation of detection technology, including biometric systems and digital monitoring. The efficacy of field operations can be significantly enhanced by the urgent implementation of training and capacity-building programmes for enforcement personnel in Kelantan, particularly in areas designated as refugee settlements and at the borders.

It is also important for law enforcement to target residents who are participating in illegal immigration by renting out dwellings or giving work opportunities to illegal immigrants. In addition to violating immigration regulations, this practice has the potential to bring about social issues such as criminal activity, employment without proper authorisation, and economic inequities in the local community. Consequently, the government must take into consideration the possibility of imposing more severe punishments on individuals or employers who are involved in this activity. This would be in addition to the implementation of regular inspections and public awareness programmes regarding the implications of this activity from a legal and security standpoint. It is essential to take these measures to guarantee that the social sustainability and security of the state of Kelantan will continue to be preserved despite an influx of Rohingya refugees.

### ***Tighten Border Controls***

Enhanced border control in Kelantan is crucial for addressing the inflow of Rohingya, given the state's extensive land border with Thailand, particularly through the Tumpat, Pasir Mas and Tanah Merah districts. The expansive border and frequent utilisation of unofficial entrance points have rendered this area susceptible to intrusions by refugees lacking legitimate documentation. Therefore, the government needs to increase the number of border control posts, enhance security patrols, and reinforce control infrastructure such as security barriers, watchtowers, and electronic monitoring systems. The increased presence of security troops in border hotspots can gradually diminish people smuggling and illegal immigration.

Besides physical reinforcement, the enhancement of innovative technologies in border management is also necessary. Radar monitoring devices, airborne drones, long-range surveillance cameras, and biometric scanners can detect suspicious movements in real time. This strategy enables enforcement authorities to operate more swiftly and effectively, hence diminishing dependence on labour-intensive manual patrols. The implementation of technology necessitates the establishment of a collaborative database across agencies, including the Immigration Department of Malaysia, the Royal Malaysia Police and the Malaysian National Security Council, to enhance the exchange of information regarding suspects or smuggling networks. This comprehensive strategy can not only improve Kelantan's border security but also establish a sustainable control mechanism for the long run.

Tighter border control also requires collaboration between Thailand and Malaysia through diplomatic and regional security mechanisms. To curb illicit cross-border activities, a stronger border control agreement and joint patrols are essential. Additionally, working with local authorities in southern Thailand to identify rat routes frequently used by human trafficking syndicates is crucial. Local communities serve as the first line of defence regarding vital information, and the government of Kelantan can play a key role locally by strengthening its involvement in the security community programme. When community members are concerned about potential threats to the border, authorities can detect and respond more swiftly.

### ***Repatriation and Resettlement to a Third Country***

The issue of repatriating Rohingya refugees to Myanmar presents a multifaceted and delicate challenge; however, it remains a crucial aspect to contemplate in the pursuit of a sustainable resolution to the ongoing refugee influx in Malaysia. Malaysia, while not a signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention, nonetheless grapples with the complexities arising from the presence of unregistered Rohingya refugees lacking legal status. Malaysia is an independent nation that prioritises the national security of its citizens.

Furthermore, Malaysia could assist third countries and international organisations like Bangladesh in establishing temporary special settlements for Rohingya refugees, such as on Bhasan Char Island. The Bangladesh government has developed this island as a more organised and controlled area for refugee settlement, in contrast to the overcrowded refugee camps in Cox's Bazar. In spite of the criticism from numerous NGOs and the international community concerning the island's location and safety, it continues to be one of the most viable solutions to alleviate the demographic and socio-economic challenges encountered by nations such as Malaysia. Relocating refugees in Malaysia to designated areas through collaboration with UNHCR and the Bangladesh government would enable a more systematic approach to refugee management, grounded in humanitarian principles.

## Conclusion

There are legitimate worries regarding the impact on national security caused by the influx of Rohingya ethnic communities in Kelantan. According to this research, the unchecked influx of Rohingya communities has threatened the political stability and independence of the nation, as well as impacted local social stability, boosted crime rates, and produced unfair economic competition. Failure to implement effective policies and weak law enforcement have revealed major gaps in the refugee management system, especially in terms of border control and monitoring of illegal immigrants.

Worryingly, people smuggling syndicates and the misuse of identity documents like fake UNHCR cards and MyKads show that the national security system is vulnerable. This leaves the door open for transnational challenges, which could undermine the legitimacy of the government and the stability of the country's politics. Within this framework, the Rohingya refugee crisis has brought attention to the fact that national security encompasses not just military but also social, economic, and political security.

In this context, the Malaysian government needs to develop a more comprehensive and cohesive strategy, which should encompass enhancing law enforcement, fortifying border controls, and streamlining the procedures for repatriation or resettlement to third countries through international collaboration. It is essential to implement these measures with careful consideration, ensuring that humanitarian principles are not overlooked while still aligning with national security.

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