

**Between Humanitarian Duty and National Concerns: Malaysian
University Students' Perceptions of Afghan Refugees**

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Abstract

Malaysia, despite its non-signatory status to the 1951 Refugee Convention, is host to over 190,000 refugees, including more than 2,800 Afghans. This study investigates how undergraduate students at the International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM) perceive Afghan refugees, employing Intergroup Threat Theory (ITT) as a conceptual lens. Through in-depth qualitative interviews with ten students, the research reveals mixed attitudes shaped by competing moral and socio-political narratives. Islamic values cultivate empathy and a sense of humanitarian obligation. Conversely, anxieties surrounding economic competition, national security, and social cohesion create scepticism. These findings highlight the complexity of host-society perceptions within a legally ambiguous refugee system. The paper argues for a more inclusive and context-sensitive policy approach, driven by public education, legal reform, and multi-stakeholder engagement to address prevailing concerns while fostering meaningful integration.

Keywords: Afghan refugees, Intergroup Threat Theory, Malaysian youth, public perception, refugee policy, social media, Islamic values

Introduction

Malaysia's role as a host country for refugees presents a unique situation. It provides de facto refuge to over 190,000 displaced persons while remaining outside the legal framework of the 1951 Refugee Convention and its 1967 Protocol. This legal non-recognition renders refugees vulnerable to exploitation, detention, and systemic exclusion from basic services (Smith, 2012; UNHCR, 2022). Among these populations, Afghan refugees numbering just over 2,800 occupy a particularly marginal position, often overshadowed by more visible groups such as the Rohingya.

Existing scholarship on refugee protection in Malaysia has primarily focused on legal frameworks, humanitarian discourses, or the role of civil society actors. However, limited attention has been paid to how ordinary Malaysians, particularly university-educated youth, perceive refugees and how these perceptions may inform or constrain future policy responses. This oversight is significant because young people constitute a politically emergent group whose views will shape the normative climate for refugee integration in decades to come.

This study investigates how undergraduate students at the International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM), a university known for its Islamic educational ethos, perceive Afghan refugees. Drawing on the extended Intergroup Threat Theory (ITT), the research examines how perceptions of realistic threats like economic strain and security intersect with religious norms and humanitarian values, alongside symbolic threats based on religious and cultural identity. The central research question guiding this study is: How do Malaysian university students at IIUM perceive Afghan refugees, and what religious, economic, and sociopolitical factors shape these perceptions?

Despite the challenges Afghan refugees face in Malaysia, public perception constitutes an additional layer of adversity. A global study by Ipsos (2019) on attitudes toward refugees found that only 24% of Malaysians believe asylum seekers are genuinely fleeing persecution, while 61% suspect they are exploiting the system for economic gain. Although 57% support the right to seek asylum from war and persecution, Malaysians are split, with 43% in favor and 43% against, when it comes to actually accepting refugees. Concerns about integration persist, with only 38% believing refugees can successfully adapt and 44% expressing doubt.

These attitudes are echoed in a national survey by Vase.ai (2020), conducted in partnership with Undi18 and civil society groups. The survey found that 70% of Malaysians supported

the deportation of refugees during the COVID-19 lockdown. This was a time marked by xenophobic rhetoric and intensified crackdowns on undocumented migrants, including Afghans. Existing literature has primarily examined refugee law, civil society roles, and humanitarianism, yet few studies have investigated how Malaysian citizens, particularly youth, perceive refugees. This study addresses that gap by focusing on university students, a politically relevant group whose attitudes may shape future refugee policies in Malaysia. In particular, it examines students at IIUM, where exposure to foundational Islamic values such as compassion, justice, and aid to the oppressed may influence their perceptions of refugees.

Intergroup Threat Theory

ITT suggests that prejudice arises when an in-group perceives an out-group as threatening resources, identity, or security (Stephan & Stephan, 2000). Realistic threats involve competition for tangible resources like jobs and housing, while symbolic threats concern cultural or value differences. The extended ITT incorporates perceived benefits, such as cultural diversity or humanitarian fulfilment, which can mitigate prejudice (Tartakovsky & Walsh, 2016). Studies using ITT show that economic concerns often outweigh humanitarian sentiments in host communities.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research design to explore how Malaysian university students perceive Afghan refugees. Qualitative methods are particularly suited to capturing the subjective meanings, moral reasoning, and emotional responses that underpin public attitudes toward marginalised communities.

Sample Selection

The research involved in-depth, semi-structured interviews with ten undergraduate students from the International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM). Participants were purposely selected based on three criteria: (1) current enrollment at IIUM, (2) self-identification as Malaysian citizens, and (3) willingness to engage in discussions on refugee-related issues. The sample was constructed to reflect diversity in gender, academic disciplines, and socio-political orientations, allowing for a broad range of perspectives within a manageable cohort for deep thematic analysis.

Data Collection

Interviews were conducted either in person or through secure virtual platforms, based on participant preferences. Each session lasted approximately 45 to 60 minutes and followed a semi-structured format. The questions focused on key themes such as awareness of refugee issues, interpretations of Islamic values, perceived economic and social impacts, and notions of national belonging. Interviews were conducted in English or Malay, according to participant comfort. All interviews were audio-recorded with informed consent and transcribed verbatim.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was applied to interpret the data. Coding proceeded through three stages: open coding to identify initial patterns, axial coding to establish connections between categories, and selective coding to refine core themes. The analysis was guided by Intergroup Threat Theory (Stephan & Stephan, 2000), allowing the data to be interpreted through the lens of realistic threats and symbolic threats. To enhance analytical rigour, peer debriefing and reflective memoing were used throughout the coding process. Ethical approval was secured through institutional procedures. All participants were assured of anonymity, confidentiality, and the voluntary nature of their participation. Pseudonyms are used throughout the analysis to protect participants' identities.

Four major but interrelated themes emerged, illustrating the tensions and dualities in students' perceptions of Afghan refugees:

1. Threat Perception Outweighs Benefits

All participants perceived Afghan refugees as both a threat and a benefit, but threat perceptions were stronger. Economic concerns, such as draining social funds and disrupting housing markets, were prominent, followed by physical and social cohesion threats. Benefits, such as humanitarian fulfilment, were acknowledged but secondary. One participant noted, "Helping refugees is good, but we can't ignore the strain on our resources."

2. Economic And Social Concerns

Economic anxiety was the dominant theme. Participants voiced concerns that Afghan refugees might compete for low-cost housing and public welfare resources. However, most agreed that refugees usually work informal, low-income jobs avoided by locals. They did not view them as major contributors to unemployment or wage suppression. A few referenced national security issues, particularly the fear of radicalisation, which are often fueled by media narratives. Petty crimes and disease concerns were mentioned but seen as less pressing. Cultural or symbolic threats were not strongly emphasised; most students believed Malaysian cultural dominance would naturally shape refugee behaviour.

These findings are consistent with prior research in the Malaysian context, where empathy for refugees is often outweighed by concerns over economic burden. Ipsos (2019) found that 61% of Malaysians view refugees as economic opportunists. Fears around radicalisation and security have also been shaped by politicised media portrayals, as noted by Sukhani (2020). Meanwhile, students' confidence in cultural resilience echoes findings by Jedinger and Eisentraut (2020), who found that perceptions of symbolic threat tend to be lower in non-Western or culturally dominant host contexts.

3. Humanitarian and Cultural Benefits

Students strongly valued humanitarian responsibility, often referencing Islamic teachings like zakat and helping the oppressed. Many felt a moral duty to support refugees, seeing their presence as a reminder of Malaysia's blessings and stability. Cultural diversity was also appreciated, although economic contributions from refugees were viewed as limited. This mirrors broader observations that Islamic values can foster empathy in Muslim-majority societies. However, students also admitted that this empathy has limits, especially when national resources feel strained. This supports Tartakovsky and Walsh's (2016) view that while humanitarian values can ease prejudice, they may not always override perceived economic threats.

4. Religion and Role of Information Sources

In Muslim-majority contexts, Islamic values like charity and brotherhood can foster empathy towards refugees. However, nationalistic concerns may limit this empathy. Social

media platforms, such as Twitter (now X), are primary information sources for youth but often spread misinformation and xenophobic narratives (Sukhani, 2020). In Malaysia, negative online sentiments surged during the COVID-19 pandemic, with refugees blamed for economic and health issues.

My research findings align with these concerns. Twitter, Instagram, Facebook, and YouTube were the primary sources of information on Afghan refugees for most participants. While students cited credible outlets like MalaysiaKini and the UNHCR, negative narratives often found in comment sections or viral posts shaped their attitudes. This reflects a broader consensus that while social media enables access to humanitarian content, it also facilitates the spread of xenophobic narratives and misinformation, particularly during times of national stress. These dynamics raise ethical challenges in refugee advocacy within digital spaces, where emotionally charged or inaccurate content can reinforce stereotypes and influence public opinion.

There was also a clear gap between awareness and understanding. Many students were unaware of the presence and actual experiences of Afghan refugees in Malaysia. This suggests that surface-level exposure via social media often fails to translate into deeper knowledge or empathy.

Policy Implications

The findings of this study reveal a complex relationship between humanitarian compassion and socio-economic anxiety in student perceptions of Afghan refugees. While there is recognition of Islamic values encouraging empathy, concerns about national stability and resource scarcity shape mixed attitudes. These insights have significant implications for refugee policy discourse in Malaysia, particularly given the country's ambiguous legal and political positioning. Refugees are classified as "illegal immigrants" under the Immigration Act 1959/63. This legal void constrains their access to employment, education, and health services, reinforcing their socio-economic vulnerability. While legal reform, such as formal recognition of refugee status or access to work permits, has been proposed by scholars and advocacy groups (UNHCR, 2022), such measures face substantial political and legal hurdles. These include securitised narratives, public resistance, concerns over national sovereignty, and a lack of political will, all of which limit the feasibility of implementing comprehensive reforms in the short term.

Therefore, policy recommendations must be framed within Malaysia's political realities and institutional constraints. In the short to medium term, a multi-stakeholder, incremental approach is more feasible. Civil society organisations and NGOs, including Islamic humanitarian groups, have played a crucial role in providing informal education, healthcare, and community support (SUHAKAM, 2021). Universities, particularly those with Islamic missions like IIUM, are uniquely positioned to cultivate inclusive narratives and promote intergroup understanding. Initiatives such as refugee scholarships, awareness campaigns, and civic education modules can help dismantle prejudice and foster long-term cultural inclusion. Greater coordination among these actors, with support from relevant government agencies, could enhance the reach and sustainability of such initiatives.

UNHCR and development partners can also facilitate pilot programs, such as community-based work schemes or education partnerships. These improve refugee self-reliance without requiring full legal recognition. These pragmatic, low-risk models have proven effective in comparable non-signatory contexts, such as Indonesia and Thailand (Missbach, 2015; Kneebone, 2016).

At the normative level, Islamic values of justice ('adl), compassion (rahma), and hospitality (karāma) offer a culturally grounded ethical framework for refugee inclusion. Leveraging these values can help align public discourse with humanitarian commitments while maintaining religious and cultural legitimacy.

In sum, while systemic reform remains elusive in the short term, a feasible path forward lies in empowering non-state actors, promoting localised inclusion programs, and anchoring refugee protection within Islamic ethical paradigms. These strategies, supported by sustained engagement from NGOs, universities, UNHCR, and community leaders, can gradually reshape public attitudes and lay the groundwork for more sustainable policy change.

The findings suggest several policy recommendations to foster inclusive refugee policies in Malaysia:

- 1. Reframe Refugee Integration:** Policymakers should highlight refugees' potential contributions to cultural diversity and economic growth, framing integration as a national asset rather than a burden.

2. **Counter Misinformation:** Public education campaigns, leveraging legitimate media and social media platforms, can address misinformation and promote positive refugee narratives.
3. **Enhance Community Engagement:** Programs facilitating interaction between refugees and Malaysians, such as cultural exchanges or volunteer initiatives, can reduce prejudice and build empathy.
4. **Legal Reforms:** Granting refugees basic rights, such as work permits and access to education, could alleviate public concerns about informal labour competition and improve integration, though this will require strategic advocacy and coalition-building to overcome political barriers.
5. **Engage Youth:** Involving university students in policy dialogues can harness their influence to shape inclusive refugee discourse, leveraging their Islamic values and educational exposure.

Conclusion

This study explored how Malaysian university students at the International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM) perceive Afghan refugees. It draws on the Intergroup Threat Theory (ITT) to examine the relationship between humanitarian values and perceived threats. The findings reveal a mixed perception. Islamic principles of compassion and solidarity shape empathetic attitudes, but concerns over economic competition, resource scarcity, and national stability create reservations about refugee integration. The voices of educated youth, particularly in institutions like IIUM, offer a valuable lens through which to understand how religious values, national identity, and socio-economic considerations shape refugee discourse in Muslim-majority, non-signatory states.

By centering student perceptions, this research contributes to the growing body of scholarship on refugee reception in Southeast Asia. It offers a culturally grounded analysis of intergroup relations in Malaysia, an area that remains underexplored compared to Western contexts. The study provides both empirical data and normative insights that can inform future academic inquiry, particularly in the fields of youth political engagement, Islamic ethics, and refugee policy in Southeast Asia. Ultimately, it emphasizes the importance of inclusive educational

initiatives and culturally sensitive policy approaches that can address public concerns while affirming the dignity and rights of refugees.

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