

PRESS RELEASE

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**IMAN RESEARCH RELEASES REPORT ON FACTORS INFLUENCING THE ROHINGYA
COMMUNITY IN MALAYSIA TOWARDS VIOLENT EXTREMIST GROUPS**

“OVER THE EDGE:

COUNTERING VIOLENT EXTREMISM AMONG VULNERABLE REFUGEE COMMUNITIES IN MALAYSIA”

June 19, 2020, Kuala Lumpur — IMAN Research, in collaboration with the Canadian government, has embarked on a project that investigates the push and pull factors influencing the Rohingya community in Malaysia towards violent extremist groups, such as the Islamic State (IS). The study has found that while the possibility of Rohingya refugees in Malaysia joining violent extremist networks is low, the push and pull factors influencing them to act on violence do exist. Therefore it is crucial for the Malaysian government and society at large to take a proactive approach in eliminating the push and pull factors by improving the living condition of Rohingya refugees in the country.

In recent years, the number of Rohingya refugees in Malaysia has consistently increased. Data by UNHCR shows that 101,580 Rohingya refugees are in Malaysia as of March 2020. This is compared to 62,513 as of September 2017. Being the single biggest refugee group makes the Rohingya community the most vulnerable. The nature of the conflict that the Rohingyas are running away from — religious persecution and the denial of an identity — could make them a target for terrorist networks as possible to recruit.

This concern was also shared by the former head of the Malaysian Royal Police Counter-Terrorism Division (E8), Dato Ayob Khan, who stated that the Rohingya crisis might be exploited by IS to recruit more members for their organisation. As such, IMAN felt it is of utmost importance to analyse the risk of Rohingya refugees in getting radicalised into violent extremist groups. Our interaction with Rohingya refugee communities in Malaysia during fieldwork sought to unveil the states they are in and their sentiments towards violence.

Methodology

The study used shadowing observations, in-depth interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs) as a data collection method. This allowed us to learn about the participants’ views on a certain subject directly and built interaction between the researchers and participants. In a wide scale setting, although these qualitative methods do not offer a generalisation based on data collected, they allow the refugees to relay their opinions and sentiments in a more comfortable environment.

The study targeted members of the Rohingya community, both men and women, living in Peninsular Malaysia. They were aged between 18 and 70 years. The interviews, observations and FGDs were conducted with consent, and in a way that ensured all participants felt safe to share their opinions freely — taking into account gender dynamics and sensitivities.

Findings

The findings from this study were categorised into four key themes:

1) Refugees' Vulnerability

Most participants in the study recounted experiences of persecution and violence back in Myanmar. Even as they migrated to Malaysia for safety, participants struggled to survive by doing odd jobs illegally and earning meagre wages. Participants also cited several other concerns such as their children's education and future, living conditions, refugee rights and access to healthcare services.

2) Sentiments towards Violence

Participants shared their experiences with regard to violence inflicted on them back in Myanmar. From discrimination, persecution and injustice, these experiences make up the shared memories of the communities. Though most participants renounce the use of violence in any situation, their painful experiences have driven a few to justify using violence to protect themselves and their rights, especially against the Myanmar authorities.

3) Feelings

Most participants show visible anger, frustration, disappointment, distrust, and also feel alienated. A lot of these feelings stem from the protracted crisis they are in. Feelings of anger, disappointment and distrust were mostly directed towards the Myanmar authorities, which is blamed for causing this dire situation.

4) Rohingya Network

Most of the participants in our study shared that they have regular interactions with the Rohingya communities based in Malaysia and other countries, like Myanmar and Bangladesh. In most cases, those contacts are their families or someone who knows their family in that country. This is important to enable them to channel funds to their relatives back home. While most of them have close-knit relationships with members of their own community in Malaysia, they also interact and communicate with people outside of their community, especially local Malaysians and migrants.

Recommendations

Finally, the *Over the Edge: Countering Violent Extremism Among Vulnerable Refugee Communities in Malaysia* report puts forth several recommendations (see full report) for the attention of government and civil society organisations. These recommendations are important to ensure self-sufficiency of Rohingya refugee communities. At the same time, it will ensure Malaysia's success in managing the risk of radicalisation towards violent extremism among refugee communities.

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