

**AN ACCOUNT OF PSYCHOSOCIAL ISSUES
AMONG SYRIAN STUDENTS ATTENDING
MALAYSIAN PUBLIC UNIVERSITIES**

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AMONG SYRIAN STUDENTS ATTENDING
MALAYSIAN PUBLIC UNIVERSITIES**

by

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Sincerely dedicated to...

Abrar Aslam Qureshi

(My Kishmish)

For constantly being by my side

**For being my best friend and critique & for listening to me
wholeheartedly all in Allah's Grace!**

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ABIM	Angkatan Belia Islam Malaysia
APA	American Psychological Association
BBC	British Broadcasting Company
CPA	Comprehensive Plan of Action
CRC	Convention on the Right of Child
EFL	English as a Foreign Language
EMGS	Education Malaysia Global Services
FIDH	International Federation for Human Rights
HEIs	Higher Education Institutions
IDPs	Internally Displaced Persons
IUM	International Islamic University Malaysia
IMARET	IMAM Response and Relief Team
IRC	International Rescue Committee
LGBTI	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender or Intersex
MAHAR	Malaysian Humanitarian Aid and Relief
ME	Middle East
MRCs	Malaysian Red Crescent Society
OUR	Open Universities for Refugees
PTSD	Post Traumatic Stress Disorder
SA	Southeast Asia
SGBV	Sexual or Gender Based Violence
SUARAM	Suara Rakyat Malaysia
UAE	United Arab Emirates
UM	University of Malaya
UNCRC	United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child

UNESCO	UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
UNHCR	United Nations High Commission for Refugees
UNICEF	United Nations Children’s Fund
UNO	United Nations Organization
USM	Universiti Sains Malaysia

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**PENGALAMAN ISU PSIKOSOSIAL DALAM KALANGAN PELAJAR
SYRIA DI UNIVERISTI AWAM MALAYSIA**

ABSTRAK

Dunia telah menghadapi peristiwa peperangan dan konflik sejak bermulanya arus permodenan. Peperangan memusnahkan masyarakat dan keluarga dan sering mengganggu struktur sosial dan ekonomi negara. Kesan perang termasuk bahaya fizikal, sosial dan psikologi jangka Panjang kepada individu. Sebarang peperangan boleh memberi kesan yang teruk jauh di luar sempadan dengan memaksa penduduk berhijrah untuk kebaikan. Perang Syria pada tahun 2011 telah mewujudkan tekanan yang teruk di rantau ini sehingga membawa kepada penghijrahan besar-besaran ke zon damai dunia bagi mendapatkan kehidupan yang lebih baik. Ramai pelajar universiti yang masih muda turut berhijrah untuk mendapatkan Pendidikan yang lebih tinggi dengan harapan masa depan mereka lebih baik dan tenteram. Kajian ini memberi tumpuan kepada pelajar university dari Syria untuk meneroka pengalaman hidup mereka semasa konflik tersebut, isu psikososial yang dihadapi serta pengurusan mereka dalam kehidupan pada peringkat ini. Kajian ini juga meneroka pandangan kolektif dan cadangan mereka sebagai pelajar antarabangsa yang datang dari zon perang melalui negara tuan rumah. Bagi mencapai objektif kajian, temubual separa berstruktur telah dilakukan dengan 15 orang pelajar university dari Syria dan satu perbincangan kumpulan fokus turut dijalankan terhadap lapan (8) pelajar university dari Syria di tiga universiti awam di Malaysia. Data telah dianalisis melalui NVivo 11 Pro dengan menggunakan analisis tematik refleks oleh Clarke dan Braun. Terdapat tiga tema utama yang timbul daripada data temubual iaitu, isu-isu psikologi, isu-isu sosial dan kebimbangan masa depan. Manakala, lapan tema utama

terbentuk daripada data perbincangan kumpulan focus meliputi, adalah halangan yang dihadapi oleh pelajar Syria di Malaysia, cadangan untuk mengubah suai dasar yang sedia ada, sumbangan yang boleh diberikan oleh rakyat Syria untuk Malaysia, persepsi kehidupan di Malaysia, jangkaan masa depan, persepsi pelajar Syria terhadap system Pendidikan Malaysia dan ungkapan tanda kesyukuran. Hasil kajian Berjaya menggambarkan keperluan pelajar antarabangsa dari latarbelakang negara yang berkonflik, termasuk keperluan perkhidmatan psikososial kepada pelajar-pelajar ini dalam mewujudkan keharmonian pelajar antarabangsa dalam persekitaran budaya baru. Penekanan turut diberikan kepada peranan pekerja sosial, kedudukan dan potensi dalam penyelidikan, praktis, dan Pendidikan terhadap pelajar antarabangsa yang terjejas dengan peperangan.

**AN ACCOUNT OF PSYCHOSOCIAL ISSUES AMONG SYRIAN STUDENTS
ATTENDING MALAYSIAN PUBLIC UNIVERSITIES**

ABSTRACT

The world has been facing events of war and conflicts since its modern conception. War destroys communities and families and often disrupts nations' social and economic fabric. The effects of war include long-term physical, social and psychological harm to the individuals. Any war could have severe impacts far beyond borders by forcing the population to migrate for good. Syrian war in 2011 created severe stress in the region resulting in the mass migration of people to the peaceful zones of the world to get a better life. Many young university-going students also migrated to achieve higher education, to make their future better and peaceful. The present study primarily aims at the Syrian university students to explore their life experiences during the conflict, their psychosocial issues, and their life management at this stage. This study also explores their opinion and suggestions as international students coming from war zones for the host country. In-depth interviews were conducted with fifteen (15) Syrian university students and three public universities in Malaysia. Clarke and Braun analyzed the data using NVivo 11 Pro and reflexive thematic analysis. Three main themes emerged from the interviews: psychological issues, social issues, and future concerns. It was discussed by the participants of the study that they are very positive regarding their future and paid gratitude to Malaysian people for their positive humanitarian attitude for their crisis. The results of the present study well represented the needs of international students coming from a conflict background, including the need to provide these students with

psychosocial services that can further contribute to facilitating the harmony of international students in the new cultural environment. It also highlighted social workers' role, positionality, and potential in research, practice, and education with regard to war-affected international students.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction

This chapter provides a detailed description of the background and significance of the research study. The chapter starts with a brief profile of the situation of Syria and the present situation of young people of Syria who are striving for peace and education. Along with the brief introduction of Syrian youth and their condition, this chapter encapsulates the in-depth overview of the study, including problem statement, research questions, research objectives, the significance of the study, the context of social work, and concludes with the chapter summary.

1.2 Overview

The world has been facing the utmost degrees of coerced shifts since the era of World War II. At present, over 65 million lives are forced to flee their homes and live as refugees or internally displaced individuals (IDPs) because of wars, genocides, and human rights violations (UNHCR, 2014). The impact of Arab Spring started the civil war in Syria, which has resulted in millions of IDPs and refugees (Balcilar & Nugent, 2016). The previous scenario of Afghan and other such refugees revealed that such disarticulation could last for three or more decades. About 6.6 million IDPs arrived in Syria, and several others have been displaced many times because of altering tides between the Syrian government and the variety of rebels types. The crisis of Syria is currently the world's largest humanitarian crisis, with 4.9 million registered refugees and over 7 million IDPs. Since it began in 2011, the Syrian internal conflict has forced millions of people to look for asylum in different

countries, mainly in Iraq, Jordan, Turkey, Lebanon, Egypt, and Libya. At present, out of 4.9million Syrians who registered as refugees outside Syria, about 2.74million are thriving in Turkey (i.e., 56.65 in total), 1.05 million in Lebanon, 0.66 million inJordan,0.25 million inIraq,0.12million inEgypt,and0.03 million in Libya.

Moreover, more than 1.15 million Syrians have European countries registered asylum. Half or more of these included women and children, who confront social turmoil and gender discrimination and gender abuse, and who are bound to live in conditions which no human being are supposed to endure, neither in their home country nor in the countries to which they have to be lived and reside (Kirisci,2014).This ongoing civil war has taken 450000 peoples' lives, dropping the life expectancy rate for the Syrian people from 70 to 56. This civil war was not only focused on Syria but on those countries that accept and host these unexpected guests from Syria either directly or indirectly, such as Turkey, Lebanon, and recently some EU countries. The cost of the Syrian war is estimated at around \$35 billion at the beginning of 2016 and increasing rapidly (World Bank, 2016).

With very little hope of ending this crisis soon, the situation is getting worse, with President Assad unwilling to resolve the issue or propose an alternative (Kirisci & Ferris, 2015). While many countries accept Syrian refugees, several unto ward incidents have sparked anti-refugee suspicions in destination countries. The evidence is that we can see the continued tolerance of Syrian refugees in the leading host countries is declining, marking the threat of danger, injustice, and discrimination to these poor refugees.

The issue of care and concern for the refugees has seen much damage since UNHCR (2016) identified that the United Nations and other agencies' funding for

such issues has been falling in the light of growing numbers of refugees. Consequently, such funding can only cover just 30 percent of the refugees' basic needs, for example, their needs related to food, water, toilet, and tent facilities.

1.3 The Syrian Conflict and Violence

With brutality that foreshadowed the entire decade of violence, the Syrian Civil War began in January 2011, with scattered protests spurred by the Arab Spring movement sweeping the region at that time. Fifteen youths, or school children depending on reports, were arrested in the south western city of Daraa for painting anti-regime graffiti on walls that the crisis explode into violence. These youths were tortured and beaten by the police, which poured fuel onto the protests as opposition groups found more people willing to join the anti-regime movement. The regime passed the point of no return as they cracked down fiercely by beating and arresting protesters in the street and eventually firing into crowds. This event helped transform the movement from protests to a violent civil war that continues today. Lynch, Freelon, and Aday (2014) argued that the Syrian movement was based on pan-Arabism and anti-corruption, similar to Arab Spring protests demanding a regime change. Consequently, the frequent assumption that Syria and the Assad regime would collapse just like what happened to Tunisia and Egypt was not unquestionably wrong, but it missed the depth of the sectarianism in Syria and the length to which the Assad regime would continue to hold power.



Figure 1.1 Graffiti from Daraa saying, "Your turn doctor"
(Asher-Schapiro,2015)

The regime crackdown on protests in the city of Daraa is the “spark which lit and aggravated the Syrian flame” of political war (Sterling, 2012). The Assad regime is a minority-Alawite sect ruling a majority Sunni populace, and Daraa, a city that is mainly Sunni but historically close to the government, is a case study in the tensions that were harbored for years against the Assad regime across Syria in Sunni-majority areas. The Assad family does not have a record of upholding human rights law when they feel that their power is threatened. Long before the current civil war, the Syrian people could be imprisoned on political charges without access to lawyers, and prisoners regularly disappeared without a trace (Ghadry, 2005). The most disturbing example of mass murder was the Hama Massacre in February 1982. In response to a Muslim Brotherhood movement against the regime, Rifat al-Assad, Bashar’s uncle, leveled the city of Hama from a hill nearby. The estimates of people killed during the shelling range from 10,000- 30,000, and the regime did not provide money to the city to rebuild for a decade (Lawson, 2004). Placing the crackdown after protests began in 2011, and this historical context shows that Bashar al-Assad being more liberal,

behaved as the head of the state. The sustained, violent tactics of actors in the Syrian Civil War over the past ten years are brutal on the general population, with comparisons commonly being made to the Rwandan genocide and the Holocaust (Landler, 2014). Currently, the actors are many and changing every day, but the landscape of the conflict can be classified into three main categories: Islamist groups (i.e., ISIS, Al-Qaeda, Jabhat al-Nusra), secular rebels (Free Syrian Army and others), and the Syrian regime itself. These groups contribute to the flow of refugees into surrounding countries and the traumatic experiences they bring with them through physical and emotional scars in the form of lost limbs, PTSD, and depression. ISIS and other Islamist groups have taken over large portions of the country where they have enacted public executions, enslaved ethnic groups, and conducted killings, resulting in mass graves throughout its territory (Shaheen, 2016). The secular opposition groups have often been accused of being Islamist, and they have also been shown on social media to be heading enemies (CBS Article/HRW). The Assad regime holds the most power over these three groups due to prison and defense infrastructure, chemical weapon stores, and a functional air force.

Though trauma and violence occurred from all groups in the Syrian conflict, the regime has committed much of the terror in Syria over the past six years. The imprisonment and torture, gas attacks, bombing, and targeting of hospitals and health workers are some of the significant ways that the regime and associated powers have caused immense physical, emotional, and mental harm on Syrians that lack of proper psycho-social care. A recent Amnesty International report demonstrated that 13,000 individuals had been systematically executed in Saydnaya prison in Syria by the regime since 2011. This is generally held in mass hangings at midnight or so after a “one to two minutes military hearing” (Amnesty, 2017). Even though it is challenging

to evaluate these situations, there is tremendous stress in living with the peril of extra judicial imprisonment and killing continually on one's mind.

Another form of waging war is chemical attacks which are not widely known as others, but the atrocity of chemical warfare multiplies the effect much further than the people that it injures or kills. Chemical attacks have psychosocial and political effects, after an attack, the general level of disorder, anarchy, fear, anxiety may stay high for long (i.e., for years), declining the existing psychiatric conditions, promoting and amplifying the risk of mass socio-genic diseases (Wessely, Hyams & Bartholomew, 2001). This makes the effects of the 2013 chemical attack by the Assad regime in Ghouta, Syria, a long-term psychological burden to many refugees. The number of people killed in this attack has not been determined, but doctors report they received 3600 patients at their hospitals with "neurotoxin symptoms" in three hours (Doctors without Borders, 2013). Accurate data on chemical weapon usage or who possesses them during the conflict has been challenging to detect, but based on the impact of prior occurrences of real and/or suspected incidents of gas attacks in Iraq, the public feels stress for years subsequently (Wessely et al., 2001). International outrage is at its highest after chemical weapons attacks, but though President Trump reflexively launched missiles in a small airstrike on the regime, it is unclear whether this event will provoke a long-term change in the United States policy. The broadest, indiscriminate tactic has been the use of bombs dropped from planes and helicopters. The Syrian Army deployed most of these bombs against civilians; however, it must be noted that there have been several attacks carried out by Russia, Turkey, the United States, and several other nations during this conflict that also killed civilians (Amnesty, 2016). In keeping with this study's refugee-centered approach, the outcomes of these attacks on civilians are

focused on more so than the events that led them to occur. Many of these attacks are “barrel bombs” used to inflict terror upon a population. Thousands of bombings have caused a massive loss of life. The UN and other organizations conservatively estimated in April 2016 that 400,000 people had been killed in the conflict, with most of them occurring because of bombs (UNHCR, 2017). Ruthless is the reality that many of these bombs are dropped by helicopters in close-range aiming for civilian populated areas and hospitals, or they are launched as mortars from nearby (Heisler, Baker & Backy, 2015). The closeness of the violence leaves few safe spaces for Syrian civilians to flee to, which adds to the stress of living under wartime conditions. Targeting healthcare workers and infrastructure has been a tactic of the Assad regime throughout the civil war. It has led many Syrian remaining in the country to become fearful of visiting the hospitals for care if the hospitals can remain open at all (Amnesty, 2011). Figure 1.2 summarizes the casualties occurring in the Syrian conflict. It shows the high rate at which casualties increased during the crisis, the violent use of explosives as a means of war against children, and decreased healthcare workers and hospitals of over 50% in 4 years. All statistics detailed in the graphic are traumatic against the Geneva Convention and establish war atrocities; because of the Assad policy of destroying hospitals and the makeshift structures that seek to replace them (some have resorted to moving underground), refugees often enter Jordan without accessing health care of any sort for a long time. Before the civil war, Syria did not possess the capability to allow mental health patients to be treated (Carter, 2007). But with violent actions taken against the health care workers exacerbate this issue, consequently it will affect in the long-term health of the Syrian people.

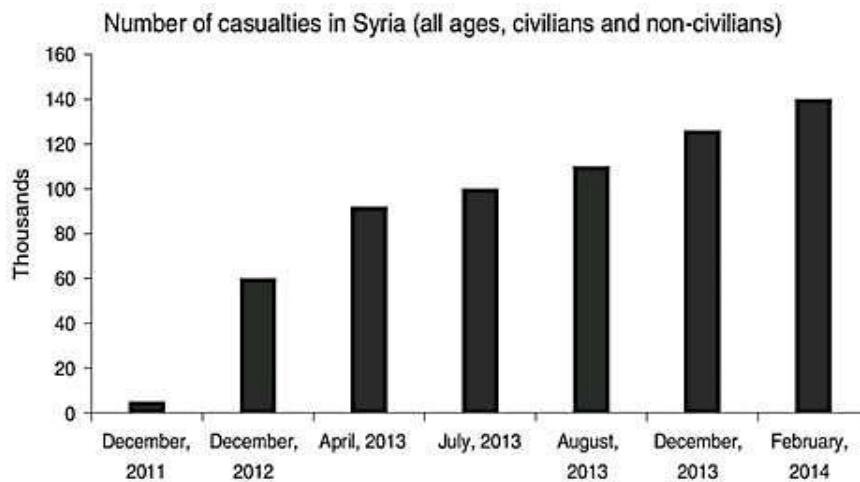


Figure 1.2 Number of Casualties in Syria Retrieved from Taleb et al.(2014).
 Syria: Health in a Country under going tragic transition

The psychological effects of displacement are possibly the least directly violent but most impactful on Syrian refugees’ mental health and psychosocial well-being. The stress of being removed from the home and social support network is a war tactic used to weaken anti-government support and merge power. Displacement from one’s home disrupts what Armelagos et al. coined as the “ecological model of disease”(1978).It is similar to Farmer’s biopsychosocial pathway mentioned previously but specifically addresses displacement (Farmer, 1996). Pedersen best describes this model as being separated into “inorganic (i.e., temperature, oxygen pressure, humidity, ultraviolet plus radiation (cosmic), soil-water trace factors, etc.) organic (intake, i.e., caloric, bacteria, protozoan and of viral organisms, etc.) and cultural (i.e., ideological, technological, symbolic, and societal systems)” parts that all contribute to the health and wellbeing of an individual (1996, p.746). This environment is altered by refugees, which exposes their ecology to new stresses that can have serious health effects. Traditional biological approaches to care do not include the cultural aspect of ecology, and the psychosocial approach works to include these factors into the patient’s overall care.

Almost eighteen thousand (18000) individuals have died in Syria by July 2012 since the uprising began in March 2011. As this uprising gained an atmosphere of war (civil), the Middle East region experts predicted that the international community would have to be vigilant to tackle the condition appropriately. It could present a danger not to the precarious situation only in the Middle East, along with extremists being involved, but it could also become a grave threat in international security systems (Dočkal, 2012).

Present Syria was recognized as a French command in 1920. After the declaration of independence (1946), Syria struggled almost 20 years under political shakiness, and a series of up heaves finished in 1963 as the Baath party took Syrian control. Nevertheless, the power struggle in the Baath party persisted till 1970, when Hafezal-Assad took the leadership position in the party and developed an authoritarian rule of Syria for the subsequent 30 years. The regime aggressively blocked an armed rebellion led by the Muslim Brotherhood in 1982 and led to ten thousand people to death. Moreover, the situation was not an outcome of religious differences only between the Alawite and the Sunni Muslim Brotherhood only. Still, instead, it was also because of the level of imposed repression on the opposition by the Assad regime. Activities by competitors have been controlled and made impossible as opposition faced severe responses by the administration until 2011 (Jamjoom & Khalaf, 2015).

The sectarian religious differences seem to be more critical for the current crisis in Syria, as all these previously determined the political orientation of the ruling regime. Majorities of over 70% are Sunni Muslims; there are Alawite (12%), Druze (4%), and a small minority of Ismailia originating from the Shia branch of the Islamic religion. The Christian is only 10% of the total population. The current government comes from the Alawite religious sect.

According to UN agencies, according to World Report (2018), the total death toll has approximately 400,000 civilian deaths. The World Bank described, about 5 million individuals sought refuge abroad and over 6 million were displaced internally. The humanitarian dimension underlines more than 90,000 Syrian refugees registered under UNHCR, while unregistered individuals are estimated at around ten thousand.

1.3.1 Conflicts around the World

There are currently ongoing wars or minor conflicts in around three dozen countries in the Middle East, North West Asia, and Sub-Saharan Africa region (Rasler & Thompson, 2021). The 16 cases of serious armed conflict in 2020 were: Cameroon (Ambazonia / North West and South West), Ethiopia (Tigray), Libya, Mali, Mozambique (north), Lake Chad Region (Boko Haram), Western Sahel Region, DRC (East), DRC (east-ADF), Somalia, South Sudan, Afghanistan, Armenia-Azerbaijan (Nagorno-Karabakh), Iraq, Syria, and Yemen (ECP, 2021). The conflicts around the world have hyper-fragility with massive impacts on people, systems, neighboring countries, and the international community (ICRC, 2018). The report of ICRC (2018) strongly addressed that more people are affected, for a longer time, through deeper needs, from food, water, and shelter, to health care services,

education, to economic opportunities. New needs are emerging in big numbers and are largely unaddressed: psycho-social concerns for the populations and the need to connect families disrupted and displaced in increasingly large numbers.

1.3.2 War Migrants Vs Refugees

In the current research, it is important to state clearly the difference between the two populations, war migrants and refugees. In the current research, the term 'refugees' means people were fleeing war or persecution across an international border. And the term 'migrants' means people are moving for reasons not included in the legal definition of a refugee.

According to the updated definition provided by UNHCR (2016), a 'Migrant' chooses to move not because of a direct threat of persecution or death, but mainly to improve their lives by finding work, or in some cases for education, family reunion, or other reasons. Unlike refugees who cannot safely return home, migrants face no such impediment to return. If they choose to return home, they will continue to receive the protection of their government. On the other hand, a 'refugee' is unable or unwilling to return to their country of origin owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, or membership of a particular social group or political opinion.

1.4 International students in Malaysia

The number of international students in Malaysia has grown significantly. In 2004, approximately 32,000 international students were studying in Malaysia. Based on the latest Ministry data, Malaysia is now the 9th largest recruiter of international students globally. The largest sources of international students are Asia

and Africa, and the five countries sending the most students are Iran, Indonesia, China, Nigeria, Syria, and Yemen. To ensure it attracts genuine, capable international students, Malaysia has introduced several measures directed at prospective international students, including creating Education Malaysia Global Services (EMGS) that streamlines the approval process for international students' visas and assists sponsored students. Private HEIs continue to attract quality undergraduate international students, and public universities are encouraged to attract quality postgraduate international students (MOHE, 2018).

The Ministry aims to ensure equity in higher education, allowing every student to fulfill their full potential regardless of location, race, gender, or socio-economic background. Data to measure equity in higher education is currently limited. The Ministry will commence the collection of demographic data to assess equity among socio-demographic groups through measures such as enrolment and completion rates.

Most of these terror incidents were blamed on Muslims particularly Arabs. Subsequently, incidents of racism, suspicion, abuse, threats, violence, religious discrimination and social exclusion against Arabs and Muslims have increased in both Western social and academic contexts (Sawann & Bosson, 2008). Hence, it has become hard for Arab students to have easy access to western countries or experiencing difficulties for those who already studying the west. The subject of Arab students in Malaysia has been studied from various angles. These include identifying cultural and language barriers they are facing (Al-Zubaidi & Rechards, 2010) and investigating the academic experiences of Arab postgraduate students and how that influenced their interactions with others (Al-Khasawneh & Maher, 2010).

Furthermore, investigating Arab students' adjustment to the Malaysian academic context, understanding Knowledge, attitudes, and barriers related to participation in research of Arab medical students (Croucher et al., 2017). In addition, examining Categories of problems among international students (Abdul Kareem, 2013), and identifying communication strategies among English as Foreign Language (EFL) Students (Aminetal.,2012). However, those Arab students who came from conflicted zones are never approached and asked about their problems in the host countries. Hence, the current study will attempt to capture the view by this lens of action.

Table 1.1 International Students at Public and Private Higher Education Institutions in Malaysia

Year	Public	Private	Total
2002	5,045	22,827	27,872
2003	5,239	25,158	30,397
2004	5,735	25,939	31,674
2005	6,622	33,903	40,525
2006	7,941	36,449	44,390
2007(July)	12,419	33,131	45,550

Source: Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia (2007)

Note: Based on student visas/passes issued by the Immigration Department, Malaysia (MID, 2007)

Malaysian recruiters have widened their market search for international students by targeting many countries in the Middle East, including the United Arab Emirates, Oman, Yemen, Saudi Arabia, Syria, and Lebanon (Sedgwick, 2004). As a result of these efforts, the number of students from the Arab World at Malaysian higher education institutions, particularly at Malaysia's International Islamic University (which uses both Arabic and English as the medium of instruction), has been growing steadily since September 11.

Many students from the Arab world are taking admission to Malaysian higher educational institutions (Arab News Agency, 2007). Likewise, a recruitment campaign is underway in the Middle East. The Ministry of Education is marketing Malaysia's good value in comparative terms and highlighting its socio-cultural and religious similarities with this region (The Star Online, 2007). Arguably, Malaysia's good bilateral relations with countries in the Middle East would ultimately increase Malaysia's number of foreign students (Rashid, 2007). Among many of the push factors that have motivated students to get an education in Malaysia are to seek safer and more affordable options closer to home. It has also been noted that increased enmity towards the West, and the resurgence of political Islam, and the traditional values in the region have also contributed to this trend (Sedgwick, 2004). In a study conducted by Dahari and Abduh (2011), with the participants from middle east and southeast Asian countries; 60 (44.44%) respondents are originated from southeast Asia (SA) such as Thailand, Indonesia, and Singapore, while 55 (40.74%) respondents came from the middle east (ME) such as Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Bahrain, Algeria, Syria, Jordan, UAE, and Palestine, suggested that Malaysia is among the most preferred countries for educational purposes in the world with more than fifty thousand students from more than 175 countries of origin. This study reveals that programs offered and tuition prices are the two most important dimensions, followed by the facilities provided by the university and the academic staff prominence.

1.5 Problem Statement

In almost every refugee incidence worldwide, many refugees arrive in the host countries with particular physical and mental health conditions demanding well-structured treatment needs. According to Hill et al. (2009), one in six refugees have a physical health problem, and two-thirds experience anxiety and depression, basically about mental and psycho-social disorders. Exposure to violence or disaster, loss of, or separation from family members and friends, deterioration in living conditions, and lack of access to services can all have immediate, as well as the long-term impact on the balance, development, and fulfillment of the social and emotional wellbeing of refugee children, families and communities (ARC,2009). Such disorders have necessitated integrating mental health and psychosocial supports into the interventions related to community services, protection and health as practical tools in emergencies and ongoing operations (Schilperooredetal, 2008).

The recent Syrian crisis, which started in 2011, forced a mass movement of people from Syria to other regions. Many students were likewise forced to leave behind their country and move towards temperate zones of the world. War in Syria impacted almost every aspect of life. Education is one of the most affected aspects of Syrian youth. This study attempts to explore the psychosocial issues faced by Syrian students when they enroll in the universities of the host countries.

The previous literature encourages the opinion that a significant proportion of students are not involved, and they tend to quit university because of issues such as adjustment and environmental instead of academic difficulties (Tinto, 2006). Some of the factors responsible for lack of engagement are; feelings of isolation, lack of alignment between university culture and the actual course, plus students' lack of

clarity (Pitkethly & Prosser, 2001; Tinto, 2006). Moreover, the studies mention the student transition as the phase of socialization in university life (McInnis, 2001). Researchers found that the socialization process is considered stressful, isolating, and disheartening by the students. It could result from the ambiguity and confusion linked with the changed norms, different ways, environment, and new learning methods (McInnis,2001; Krauseetal.,2005; Guilfoyle & Harryba, 2009). As for non-English student populations, the problems and anxieties are aggravated by additional factors of language associated with acculturation (Berry, 2008). This process of being cut from existing environments and entering into a new academic and social community are the reasons that put these immigrant students at risk of not pursuing their university education (Hillman, 2005; Tinto, 2006). Previous studies reported (McKenzie & Schweitzer, 2001) non-conducive levels of social assimilation, unsatisfactory academic performance, and lack of satisfaction with university life have been acknowledged to be significant predictors of attrition rate. They suggested that efforts need to be put in both social and academic aspects (mutually affecting) to achieve positive integration of students (McKenzie &Schweitzer,2001).

Moreover, Hillman (2005) advocates collecting detailed qualitative information and data on students' experiences and perceptions in the social and academic domains to understand course attrition better. The specific groups include the indigenous populations, people with disabilities, rural and isolated areas, women living in rural areas, the socio-economically disadvantaged, and from non-English speaking backgrounds such as migrants and refugees. These specific group shave conventionally been deprived or correctly categorized in their employment and educational opportunities access (Silburn et al., 2010). Universities take notice of the transitions of these groups to improve their access, inclusion in participation,

retention, and success in the course of their studies (Clerehan, 2003). Nevertheless, it is premised that these groups are at risk of more marginalization instead of having them in inclusion groups (Clerehan, 2003). Subsequently inspecting the plight of university refugee students, O'Rourke (2011) determined that treating everybody the same could be unfair, supporting distinctly directed programs as means of rightful admittance to university education. A dire point to understanding the refugees' shift to university is to appreciate their pre-migration and post-migration conditions.

By the end of July 2018, 159,980 refugees and asylum-seekers have registered with UNHCR in Malaysia, out of which 2800 are Syrians (UNHCR, 2018). Officials of Malaysia showed their intention to accommodate more students from war-affected countries and countries marked by humanitarian crises in the Malaysian education system at a recent conference (PIE, 2018). Directing to the country's plans and intention to fix its education system, In the same conference (PIE, 2018), Idris Jusoh, the Higher Education Minister, said Malaysia was in a distinct position to help and support these students, onshore and online, at both levels. He further said, "We do education differently in Malaysia as our integrated cumulative grade point average will ensure universities produce balanced and holistic graduates," and "With our distinct ranking and achievement, we can surely play an important role in imparting inclusive education for the less fortunate students and who belong to the countries such as Palestine, Yemen, Lebanon, Syria, and the Rohingya."

Many studies on refugee education address the importance and need to educate children and youth for a better future. In one of the surveys (Save the Children, 2017), teachers working in refugee camps and with students coming from Syria, Sudan, Afghanistan, and Myanmar constantly reported that without an

education, the refugees' children opportunities and youth will be narrow: They would remain in obscurity and may follow the wrong path. As national and international organizations, we as hosting governments and an international community should help children and youth access their right to education and power for possible change. The teachers believed that:

- Education is a right of refugees, and it should be prioritized
- Education helps refugees to cope with crises and brings hope.
- Education will restore their futures and help to bring harmony, peace, and stability.

The human, social and economic impacts of war, including the educational toll, are devastating. Conflict is a major barrier to education, and with 35 countries identified as experiencing armed conflict (1999 to 2008), the extent of the problem internationally is substantial (UNESCO, 2011). Education can play in peace building means that the higher educational prospects of those who leave their home countries are paramount (UNESCO, 2011). The current large-scale migration of Syrian refugees across Europe is a case in point. Second, to provide basic needs such as food, drink and shelter, higher education prospects are a key priority, as reflected in the emergence of initiatives to support Syrian (and other) refugees to access higher education (Redden, 2016; De-Wit & Altbach, 2016).

Refugee experiences may foster the development of personal strength, resilience, and educational aspiration that can be brought to higher education (Hutchinson & Dorsett, 2012; Naidoo, 2015). Stability may not just come from adaptability, hope, and a focus for the future (Hutchinson & Dorsett, 2012) but also a strong sense of agency (Lawson, 2014). Relational contexts and social capital can

support the development of resilience (Hutchinson & Dorsett, 2012; Naidoo, 2015); for example, through the provision of social support (King, 2013). Nevertheless, despite the strengths developed due to the refugee experience, the complexity of these individuals' social, educational, and economic backgrounds predisposes their under-representation in higher education.

The refugee children's right to education is written in international agreements. The United Nations Convention on the Status of Refugees, 1951, mentions that "countries shall accord refugees the same treatment as is accorded to nationals concerning elementary education" (UNHCR, 2010, p.24). The 1948 Declaration of Human Rights also addresses the refugees' right to education (O'Rourke, 2014). This significant right is critical to Syrian refugees' support during the conflict (McCall & Vang, 2012; O'Rourke, 2014; Ficarra, 2017; Warner, 2017). As the legal right to education calls only for the uniform treatment as other country nationals receive, the best practice includes attending to the specific unique needs of refugee students. For instance, "all students have a legitimate right to education to succeed in life without requiring relinquishing their cultural identities." (McCall & Vang, 2012, p.33).

Lăzăroiu (2015) reported that education for such students should respond to their various needs: "education levels, language demands, and psychosocial affairs both in and outside the classroom settings" (pp. 1384). Thus, the response determines that education access is imperative for refugee students. In terms of the current study, we can relate valuable research by Komsuoglu and Yurur (2017) that suggested the increase in immigrants' number and inclusive diversity in higher education, the evaluation of access and participation as attainment for the societies have an undeniable impact on the discernibility of the positive offerings of immigrants to

community. For such particular reason, all humanitarian and social determinations should be well taken to the public, and it has to be stressed that as the fact that like all other public supports, the provided support for Syrian youth has a legal basis, limits, and certain conditions like all the other public supports. It should be deemed in mind that Syrian children and youth hope sharing a shared future in our country should be encouraged and supported for their personal development and future society.

Regarding search based on previous research study, it was noted that there is a shortage of studies on migrant or refugee students studying in Malaysia or other parts of the world, and limited information is available on refugee or migrant students in the Asian region. Previous studies (Banks, 2015; Brekke & Brochmann, 2015; Pisani & Grech, 2017) on refugees in Asia have been limited to state policies and, more significant socio-political developments affecting refugees. To the best of the author's knowledge, no information is available on the students' coming from conflict zones' psychosocial issues. Studies carried out in the West commonly focus on written and spoken media and political discourses, notably in mainstream newspapers and political leaders. These studies mainly address to construct 'new racism' (Barker, 1981), which is the mitigation and justification of racist behavior by a majority group and the practices of those in power to legitimize the exclusion of refugees, asylum seekers, and immigrants. It has been observed that previous studies focused on refugees who resettled in European and North American regions (Stein, 1986; Gostin & Roberts, 2015; Ratković & Piętka-Nykaza, 2016). There is a scarcity of information on student refugee or non-refugee populations, especially in non-signatories to the UNHCR Refugee Convention. Most of the studies in this area come from UNCHR signatories, such as European and North American countries and Australia.

There is a scarcity of studies that foreground the expressions of refugee students alongside both elite and non-elite voices regarding refugee psychosocial issues and demands. Most studies do not include the perspective of students from themselves. Evidence on the relationship between forced migration and the educational experiences of refugees is thin (Shakya,2012).

For the present research, streaming through the literature and reading the reports, it has been observed that most studies came from the refugee population and the population traveling to other safe zones of the world to build or set up their lives in peace. It was also observed that literature on population comprised of youth having tertiary education is very little. In the present research, the people of the study was taken who were not directly traumatized by the event of the war in Syria, but in the same scenario, they were suffering from specific psycho-social issues since their home country is under conflict. This research is aimed at this population, who has left Syria with the aim of settling into a peaceful zone, taking education, and hoping to get back to their home land when the situation is better. Most of the time, the media reports and news agencies have focused on the refugees, but on the other hand, the populations of the same country not having direct traumas from war also hold an opinion, which is necessary to hear and report for the holistic picture of the event. That is why, in this study, the research has taken the impacts of war on normal migrants coming to a safe country and not including the traumatized population in terms of war impacts.

The psychosocial issues this research intended to highlight or explore from the targeted population can be issues related to stress, anxiety, relocation, acculturation, fear, future plans, current issues, feelings of homeless, separation from family, etc. this study also intended to explore the future life plans and expectations

of the Syrian youth taking higher education. It is intended to hear and report the direct narratives coming from an educated population of a conflict-stricken zone of the world.

The researcher has a personal history of an immigrant from Indian occupied Kashmir to Pakistan. On the part of the researcher, it was personally experienced that anxiety and distress are at their peak when one leaves their homeland. Along with these feelings, fear of the future is also extreme. The process of immigration and landing into a new environment, understanding the environment and hoping to get a better life is itself very depressive. So, the intended study has a particular association with the researcher herself regarding the personal experiences related to migration due to conflict in a particular region.

Malaysia is getting prominent in the international education scenario. Report written for the UNESCO World Conference 2009 on the role of Higher Education titled “Trends in global higher education: Tracking an academic revolution” stated that 2.5 million-plus students across the country are studying and seeking education outside their own countries (Altbach, Reisberg & Rumbly, 2009). Malaysia was then rated at 11th position in the list of countries hosting the highest numbers of international students. Approximately 2% of international students in universities chose Malaysia as their preferred destination for higher education. The Higher Education Ministry of Malaysia estimates they will bring more than 200,000 international students in 2020 (Olutokunbo, Ismail & Saundi,2013).

A study conducted in Universiti Teknologi Malaysia listed the student issues into various aspects, including finances, health, lifestyle, career, social, recreational, psychological, social and personal relationships, marriage and sexual, family,

religion, academic work, curriculum-related, and teaching methodology problems (Alavi & Masor, 2011). One study (Ahmad et al., 2017) conducted on Afghan students in Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM) stated that international students placed in unfamiliar settings would cause them anxiety, depression, ambiguity. These feelings always happen to newcomers, especially when they have to adapt to a new language, accommodation difficulties, economic burden, solitude, and slowly lead to anxiety, apprehension, depression, and health issues. Furthermore, this study implied that these students went through homesickness, leading to culture shock due to culture differences, especially when homesickness appears to sink in. Amat, Rahman, and Ishak (2010) also suggested that international students in Malaysia face a few difficulties to adapt new cultures, climates, and care. However, few factors are considered helping these international students adapt better, including the similarity of culture, linguistic ability, and proficient services at the institute.

All the above literature addresses different international communities of students in Malaysian universities. However, by streaming through past literature, there is some gap in those studies related to international students coming from conflicted zones of the world. Thus, to address this gap, this study will explore the representation of Syrian students in Malaysian Universities through an analysis of media texts in the public space and personal narratives by the Syrian student community. Besides, this study also uses a discourse analysis lens critically since the domination of the elite voices will be confronted by giving the student community defendants a space to discuss and share about the scenario in which they live, which might not always be following the depictions and representations observed in the discourse of public. Thus, the study's choice to practice data sets types, media, and personal narratives is deliberate to achieve a more comprehensive picture of the (students) Syrian representation in Malaysia.

Findings from this study provide new insights into psycho-social problems and educational aspirations of Syrian youth who arrived in host countries, their encounters as they navigate through tertiary education, and their approaches to reporting these issues. This research would inspect the challenges confronted by the international students in coming from a disturbing situation with many hopes in their minds.

The information gained is beneficial for the university's management to understand better, equip themselves, and get better prepared while dealing with students from conflicted zones.

1.6 Research Objectives

The current study has the following objectives.

1. To examine the current psychosocial issues faced by Syrian students in Malaysia.
2. To explore the Syrian students' attempt to cope with their psychosocial issues.
3. To explore Syrian students' future life expectations while living in Malaysia.
4. To explore the suggestions from Syrian students regarding the possible ways or policy modification by which these students would be a fruitful and productive induction for the Malaysian economy.

1.7 Research Questions

1. Which are the psychosocial issues and problems related to Syrian students? What are the main impacts of forced migration on the psychosocial wellbeing of Syrian students?
2. What kind of personal efforts are the Syrian students to cope with their psychosocial issues?
3. What are the expectations of students regarding their future life in Malaysia?
4. What could be the possible ways and policies the Malaysian government could adopt to make the induction of these youngsters fruitful towards Malaysian economy?

1.8 Significance of the Study to the Social Work Field

A broad scope of hypotheses, information, research, and aptitudes to guarantee extensive and ample inspection of the situation is brought into a bright spectrum mainly due to the social workers. Social work assessment ranges from focused and concise overt needs examination through to wide-ranging all psychosocial and risk evaluation includes social and mental needs, qualities, and stressors. Those evaluator assistances are significantly focused on mediations to deal with the psychosocial and deep subject matters that are distressing on the person's wellbeing, progress, and affluence.

In different settings and in a scope of jobs encompassing direct case work, network work, the board and arrangement involve many social laborers working with the refugees. An incredible and imperative commitment is offered by those Social specialists, including providing state-based information and assistance to health care