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CONTENTS

Editorial

Ishtiaq Hossain 513

Special Articles

Politics of Forced Migration and Refugees: Dynamics of
International Conspiracy?
Md. Moniruzzaman 519

Roots of Discrimination Against Rohingya Minorities:
Society, Ethnicity and International Relations
AKM Ahsan Ullah and Diotima Chatteraj 541

Exploring Ways to Provide Education in Conflict Zones:
Implementation and Challenges
Kamal J. I. Badrasawi, Iman Osman Ahmed and Iyad M. Eid 567

Political Settlement Analysis of the Blight of Internally
Displaced Persons in the Muslim World: Lessons
from Nigeria
Ibrahim O. Salawu and Aluko Opeyemi Idowu 595

Research Articles

Women's Work Empowerment through "Re-upcycle"
Initiatives for Women-at-home
Rohaiza Rokis 617

The Islamization of the Malaysian Media: A Complex
Interaction of Religion, Class and Commercialization
*Shafizan Mohamed and
Tengku Siti Aisha Tengku Mohd Azzman* 635

Rise of Central Conservatism in Political Leadership:
Erbakan's National Outlook Movement and the 1997
Military Coup in Turkey
Suleyman Temiz 659

Language Policy and Practices in Indonesian Higher Education Institutions <i>Maskanah Mohammad Lotfie and Hartono</i>	683
A Novel Critique on ‘The Scientific Miracle of Qur’an Philosophy’: An Inter-Civilization Debate <i>Rahmah Bt Ahmad H. Osman and Naseeb Ahmed Siddiqui</i>	705
Duties and Decision-Making Guidelines for Shari‘ah Committee: An Overview of AAOIFI <i>Muhammad Nabil Fikri Bin Mhd Zain and Muhammad Amanullah</i>	729
Waqf Institutions in Malaysia: Appreciation of Wasatiyyah Approach in Internal Control as a Part of Good Governance <i>Nor Razinah Binti Mohd. Zain, Rusni Hassan and Nazifah Mustaffha</i>	749
Muslim Jurists’ Debate on Non-Muslim Religious Festivals and Its Effect on Muslims in the United States <i>Ali Ahmed Zahir</i>	765
Archaeological Analysis of Arabic-Malay Translation Works of Abdullah Basmeih <i>Azman Ariffin, Kasyfullah Abd Kadir and Idris Mansor</i>	785
<i>Takyif Fiqhī</i> and its Application to Modern Contracts: A Case Study of the Central Provident Fund Nomination in Singapore <i>Mohamed El Tahir El Mesawi and Mohammad Rizhan bin Leman</i>	807
Revisiting English as a Foreign Language (EFL) Vs. English Lingua Franca (ELF): The Case for Pronunciation <i>Wafa Zoghbor</i>	829
“How did we Choose?” Understanding the Northern Female Voting Behaviour in Malaysia in the 14th General Election <i>Ummu Atiyah Ahmad Zakuan, Mohd Azizuddin Mohd Sani, Norehan Abdullah, and Zaireeni Azmi</i>	859

- Unintended Consequences? The Commodification of Ideas
in Tertiary Education and their Effects on Muslim Students
Anke Iman Bouzenita, and Bronwyn Wood 883
- Ultra Petita and the Threat to Constitutional Justice:
The Indonesian Experience
Muhammad Siddiq Armia 903
- Methods of Qur’ānic Memorisation (Ḥifẓ):
Implications for Learning Performance
Mariam Adawiah Dzulkifli, and Abdul Kabir Hussain Solihu 931
- Book Reviews**
- Saudi Arabia in Transition: Insights on Social, Political,
Economic and Religious Change by Bernard Haykel, Thomas
Hegghammer and Stephane Lacroix (Eds.). New York, USA:
Cambridge University Press, 2015, pp. 351,
ISBN: 978-0-521-18509-7
Syaza Farhana Shukri 949
- ‘Arab Spring’: Faktor dan Impak (‘Arab Spring’: Factors
and Impact). Edited by Wan Kamal Mujani & Siti Nurulizah
Musa. Bangi: Penerbit Fakulti Pengajian Islam,
Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia. 2015, pp. 164.
ISBN 978-967-5478-91-8.
Mohd Irwan Syazli Saidin 952
- Faith in an Age of Terror. Edited by Quek Tze Ming and
Philip E. Satterthwaite. Singapore: Genesis Books,
Singapore, 2018, pp.150.
ISBN: 978-981-48-0707-4
Rabi’ah Aminudin 956
- Karl Marx: Greatness and Illusion. By Gareth Stedman Jones.
London: Penguin Books, 2017, pp. 768. Paper Back.
ISBN 978-0-141-02480-6
Zahid Zamri 959

Research Note

“O People of the Book”: An Exegetical Analysis
of the Ahl al-Kitāb in Qur’ānic Discourse

Jonathan Alexander Hoffman

965

Conference Report

International Conference on Religion, Culture and Governance in the
Contemporary World (ICRCG2018) 3-4 October 2018
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Atiqur Rahman Mujahid

979

Exploring Ways to Provide Education in Conflict Zones: Implementation and Challenges

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Abstract: Millions of children in conflict-affected countries are deprived of their fundamental rights to education. Using the qualitative exploratory research method, this study aims to explore ways of providing education to such children, and to identify the challenges facing their implementation. It also presents two short case studies conducted on Palestinian and Syrian refugees residing in Malaysia to explore their perceptions towards their education in their current situation and future orientation. The results show that despite the educational programmes initiated by various organizations, the affected community continue to face numerous political, financial, psychological, economic, administrative, or institutional challenges. The analysis of the interviews data revealed several categories and themes, among them related to the participants' current situation, educational needs, roles of different members of the community involved, and the challenges. The study recommends increasing efforts to meet the educational demands of the huge number of children out of schools.

Key words: Education; conflict-affected countries; refugees; strategies.

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Abstrak: Jutaan kanak-kanak di negara-negara bergolak sedang dinafikan hak asasi mereka untuk mendapatkan pendidikan. Melalui keadah penyelidikan kualitatif eksploratori, kajian ini meninjau kaedah-kaedah untuk memberikan pendidikan kepada golongan kanak-kanak ini, dan untuk mengenal pasti cabaran-cabaran berkaitan pelaksanaannya. Kajian ini turut membentangkan dua kajian kes pendek yang telah dijalankan ke atas pelarian Palestin dan Syria yang kini menetap di Malaysia untuk meneroka persepsi mereka terhadap pendidikan dalam situasi semasa mereka serta pandangan masa hadapan. Hasil dapatan menunjukkan bahawa walaupun program-program pendidikan telah diwujudkan oleh banyak pihak, golongan pelarian berterusan mengalami cabaran-cabaran dari segi politik, kewangan, psikologi, ekonomi, pentadbiran, serta perubahan institusi. Analisis ke atas temu bual menunjukkan kategori-kategori dan tema-tema, antaranya berkaitan pengalaman partisipan mengenai keadaan semasa, keperluan-keperluan pendidikan, peranan pelbagai anggota komuniti yang terlibat, serta cabaran-cabaran. Kajian ini mencadangkan supaya usaha-usaha dapat ditingkatkan untuk memenuhi keperluan pendidikan kanak-kanak keciciran yang bilangannya amat ramai.

Kata Kunci: Pendidikan; negara bergolak; pelarian; strategi.

Introduction

The number of children affected by violent conflicts and other crises is increasing at an alarming rate. The literature reports varied estimates for statistics about the number of children who have been displaced from their countries or are still residing in conflict zones. According to UNICEF, around 50 million children from various countries of the world, mainly the Middle East, have fled their homes, with 28 million children being displaced due to violent brutal conflicts and other crises like extreme poverty or experiencing risky or dangerous journeys to get to school (UNICEF, 2016a; UNICEF, 2016b; UNICEF Ethiopia, 2016). The causes of these children's conflict may be direct or indirect, short-term or long-term, while the detrimental effects and risks of such conflict includes; abuse, exploitation, abduction, and deep emotional and psychological problems and trauma (UNESCO, 2016; UNICEF, 2014a; UNICEF, 2014b; Beste, 2015; Justino, 2015; Shaw, Espinel, & Shultz, 2007).

With regards to education, during the time of conflict or crisis, education is the least factor to be considered compared to other basic needs like food, water, shelter and protection (Nicolai, et al., 2016; Nicolai & Triplehorn, 2003; Roger, 2002). This means that children and

youth are deprived of the fundamental right of education that is upheld by the international conventions, agreements and declarations (OHCHR, n.d.; Zeldin, 2007). The 'Education Can't Wait' (ECW) initiative has highlighted that in 35 crisis-affected countries, around 75 million children and young people (aged 3-18) are currently out of school, with a high percentage comprising of girls (Nicolai, et al., 2016). UNICEF has also reported that millions of conflict-affected children are out of school, robbed of their education in conflict-torn Middle East and North Africa. It further reports that thousands of schools cannot be used; and hundreds of teachers, education personnel and school children have been killed (UNICEF, 2016c; UNICEF, 2015a). Millions of school children have experienced physical and psychological problems; schools have become places of fear, danger and death. For instance, in the Gaza Strip, school children have faced three major military confrontations in the last six years which has resulted in the killing of at least 551 Palestinian children in 2014. This figure exceeds the fatalities in other years. It was found that around 3,370 children were injured and many struggled with lifelong disabilities. In addition to this, at least 281 schools were damaged, while eight were destroyed (UNICEF, 2015a). Teachers were also detained, injured and killed. During the first *intifada* in Palestine, which broke out between 1987 and 1994, many schools and higher institutions were closed. Teachers were unable to reach their schools due to stringent curfews and occupation checkpoints. Thousands of students and teachers were exposed to harassment, arrests and killings by the Israeli occupation (Hussein, 2005). In 2000, when the second Intifada began, at least 803 children were killed and another hundred were arrested, while more than 300 schools were damaged as a result of attacks by the Israeli military occupation (PGAAWC, 2007). In Syria, the conflict has caused many problems that are threatening the whole education system. More than 3 million children aged between 5-17 are out of school. Many schools are unsuitable because they have been destroyed or are being used as shelters for the displaced families or for military purposes (UNICEF, 2015a). (See Case one below)

The literature maintains that priority should be given to education during and after conflicts (Education Can't Wait, 2017) because education is seen as "instrumental to economic development and social stability." It reduces the negative effects that children experience due to conflict, and provides them with the hope of a positive future

(Education Can't Wait, 2017). Education helps children to be mentally and psychologically healthy, confident, secure, and motivated (Roger, 2002). It also provides them with hope of reconciliation when the conflicts end and they return to their homes (UNICEF, 2015a). Briefly, without education, conflict-zone affected children will be at risk of losing their childhood ambitions; yet with education they will be better equipped to tackle poverty, violence and injustice (Nicolai, et al., 2016). Unless more rational, attainable and significant initiatives are taken, the current situation and future is likely to deteriorate. It is important to bear in mind that "high-level statements and promises are not enough to ensure every child's right to an education" (Manuchehr, 2011).

This paper aims to explore ways to provide education to conflict-affected children and discover the challenges of implementation and access to education as discussed in the literature. It also presents two short case studies conducted on Palestinian and Syrian refugees residing in Malaysia to further explore their perceptions about their current situation and future orientations towards education. This paper utilized an exploratory qualitative research methodology (Creswell, 2013).

Initiatives to Meet the Educational Needs of Conflict-Affected Children

The literature reports upon a considerable number of educational projects and initiatives implemented in conflict-affected zones and other areas by international, local governmental and non-governmental organizations, including: UNICEF, UNHCR, UNESCO, UNDP, ICRC and many other NGOs (Breen, 2002). Other Islamic organizations include Islamic Relief Worldwide (IRW), the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) and many others scattered in different parts of the world including as Malaysia.

Below are selected educational initiatives that have been implemented for conflict-affected children (UNICEF, 2015a).

No Lost Generation

The United Nations and other non-governmental organizations and international donors, along with UNICEF started the 'No Lost Generation' initiative in 2013 to protect the future of children affected by the conflict in Syria and other neighboring countries. Unlike other humanitarian initiatives and projects, UNICEF considers children's education and

protection to be at the heart of its initiative. It offers sustainable activities to achieve its ultimate objectives which include: increasing children's learning and skills, providing a protective environment and broadening opportunities for children and adolescents. The initiative has achieved significant results in Syria, Jordan, Iraq, Lebanon and Turkey. However, there are specific challenges to the implementation of these activities due to the continuous conflict in Syria (UNICEF, 2015b; UNICEF, 2014c; No Lost Generation, 2016a; No Lost Generation, 2016b; No Lost Generation Initiative, 2014).

Back-to-learning campaigns

UNICEF has launched campaigns in order to help and encourage conflict-affected children to return to school and resume their learning in a more secure environment. Good examples are its campaigns implemented in Gaza, Jordan, Sudan and Syria. Educational supplies were distributed to children, and resources were distributed to replace those damaged in schools. Volunteers conducted visits to refugees to enhance their awareness of the importance of education. Training programs were also conducted to enhance teachers' skills. These campaigns have been able to reduce the number of children out of school (UNICEF, 2017b; UNICEF, 2015b). However, the campaign has faced financial and institutional challenges.

Expanded Learning Spaces

Reports have shown that in conflict-zones, education infrastructures are often badly affected. For example, in Syria, Yemen and Gaza, thousands of schools cannot be used for teaching because they have been damaged or used as shelters. In neighboring countries like Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey, thousands of Syrian refugee children are failing to attend school because of the overburdened national education infrastructure (UN News , 2015). Thus, UNICEF and other agencies in the Global Partnership have started the process of rehabilitating damaged schools to make teaching there safer. They have also provided suitable furniture and other related supplies (UNICEF, 2015a). Yet, the challenge remains to secure more funds to meet these increasing educational demands.

Self-learning

Millions of conflict-affected children are out of school. They have either left regular schooling or are not been able to join schools due to

conflict as is happening in the Middle East. Thus, UNICEF, UNRWA and other education partners have designed self-learning programs to support affected Palestinian and Syrian refugee children. UNICEF has supported the preparation and production of educational materials in line with the Syrian national curriculum covering all core subjects from Grade 1 to 9. UNICEF has also provided an accreditation process for a self-learning curriculum in cooperation with the Ministry of Education in Syria. The implementation of this program has been carried out using a range of online and offline learning tools in the local community such as in homes, places of worship and local centres. Trained local teachers and facilitators help to conduct the classes. In addition, UNRWA has developed an online Interactive Learning Program (ILP) containing lessons and educational games that focus on literacy and numeracy for children of Grades 1 to 4. Furthermore, UNRWA TV broadcasts lessons for children in Grades 5 to 9. The main challenges they face are funding and the obtaining the required infrastructure to keep the programs running (UNICEF, 2015c).

E-learning & Virtual School for Education in Crises

The report 'Education under Fire' highlighted that e-learning initiatives can be used as an alternative to attending school in conflict zones, where students face difficulties to attend regular classes or travel to school due to conflict. This also reduces the need for printed materials. Another initiative, 'Virtual School for Education in Crises,' is being developed to help conflict-affected children and adolescents to continue their education and receive a certificate, regardless of their location or time lost from attending school. This initiative provides an online learning platform in Arabic language comprising four core subjects: Arabic, English, Math and Science, along with a system of online assessments and certification. The challenges facing this initiative are the on-line facilities as well as the skills needed to learn using these facilities (UNICEF, 2015a).

Accelerated Learning Program (ALP)

The Accelerated Learning Program (ALP) is a program that was established by UNHCR and ECHO to offer opportunities for elderly refugees and asylum seekers who have missed the chance of schooling or who lack access to basic education. It has been applied in many countries like Kenya (Odhiambo, 2016). The Lebanese Ministry

of Higher Education (MEHE) offered the ALP program calling it “Reaching All Children with Education in Lebanon (R.A.C.E)”. It was intended for out-of-school Syrian children and adolescent refugees aged between 7-18 years who had no formal education or had been out of school for two years or more. It was intended to help children and adolescents to complete their basic education requirements in a short period. It also helped children and youth to catch up with the Lebanese school curriculum enabling them to continue into formal education (The Speed School Fund, 2016).

Islamic Relief Worldwide Initiatives and Projects

The Islamic Relief Worldwide (IRW) has implemented several sustainable social and economic projects in response to disasters, and emergencies by working with local communities, regardless of race, religion or gender. The organization provides training programs for teachers, assists in building and equipping schools and offers literacy classes. The organization has conducted and delivered projects in more than 30 countries, including the Middle East (Islamic Relief Worldwide (IRW), 2015). In their Annual Report (2014), they detailed the projects offered to conflict-affected people in Syria and Gaza such as: ‘Protecting life and dignity: Providing vital relief and protection’: ‘Empowering communities: Changing lives with sustainable development’: ‘Campaigning for change: Tackling the root causes of suffering’ and ‘Keeping children safe’ (Islamic Relief Worldwide (IRW), 2015).

Challenges Affecting Education of Refugees

Children and adolescents are the most vulnerable and the most affected among all victims of war. They are affected physically and psychologically. At the same time, they face many challenges in continuing their education. These challenges can be categorized into six factors; Psychological, Economic, Political, Security-related, Administrative and Institutional (The Speed School Fund, 2016).

Psychological challenges.

Being exposed to war, violence, death, and displacement from home countries are considered to be the most damaging factors for the development of children and adolescents, who are highly susceptible to psychological trauma. In addition, these traumatic events have long-term effects and have led to several psychological problems (Silove,

et al., 2014; Tempany, 2009; Shaw, Espinel, & Shultz, 2007; Conley, 2001). According to the American Psychiatric Association's mental health manual, (DSM) children and adolescents who are exposed to war are diagnosed with one or more serious symptoms of war trauma known as Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). "*Negative expectations about one's self, others, or the world*" is one of DSM's diagnostic Criteria for PTSD (Pai, Suris, & North, 2017; Baranowsky, 2013; American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Consequently, many psychological problems are associated with negative expectations about the future and have a large negative impact on education and learning capability Major depressive disorders (MDD), high levels of emotional distress, conduct disorders (CD), attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorders (ADHD), and a fear of failing are among the common PTSDs facing this segment of society (Tull, 2014; Conley, 2001). Many studies have supported this; illustrating that children and adolescents who experience traumatic events develop a negative future orientation, a feeling of helplessness, isolation, depression and hopelessness (Hall, et al., 2014; Dawson , 2011). Refugees education and learning abilities are significantly affected by war, and this could be one of the reasons behind the high number of students dropping out of school. Moreover, the roles of children and adolescents' changed from being students to becoming the breadwinners of the families, or they may have to be responsible for taking care of their parents or younger siblings. These new roles are stressful and place pressure on their learning abilities. Working for long periods without taking a rest affects them physically, such that they do not have enough time to study. It also affects their attention span and ability to focus in class.

The consequences of being placed in a new school environment or attending a new school in the host countries as a refugee have increased the risk of harassment, discrimination and bullying by local children (Secrest, et al., 2013).

Economic challenges.

Many of the host countries who have not signed the 1951 Refugee Convention or its 1967 Protocol, such as Lebanon and Malaysia accept refugees but are only considered as transit countries i.e. they are not obliged to provide any help to these refugees. As a result, the refugees are exposed to economic problems. For example, in transit countries,

refugees are not provided with working permits (Brussels Conference Education Report, 2017; Mayer & Doyle, 2015) This means that many of them cannot find suitable jobs to meet the cost of living, including school fees for their children and transportation costs. Furthermore, some of the host countries do not accept the children of refugees to study in government schools, hence children must enrol in private schools or non-governmental organization (NGOs) schools. Many families are unable to send their children to such schools because they cannot afford the private school fees or there is a lack of NGO schools nearby. Moreover, in an attempt to overcome their financial difficulties some refugees force their children to work to increase the household income and to support their family which causes them to halt schooling after they arrive in the host country (Secret, et al., 2013). In addition, they often marry-off the females in their family at a young age to reduce the financial burden and often these girls drop out of education (Human Rights Watch, 2016a). Lastly, difficulties into providing basic needs such as food, shelter, and clothing mean that most refugee families put children's education as a second priority (Secret, et al., 2013).

Political Challenges.

The internal policies of host communities restrict residential visas and work visas for refugees. At the same time, UN cards do not provide them with full rights or full protection. Additionally, many host countries are not willing to accommodate large number of refugees causing tension in the community (Mayer & Doyle, 2015). Part of the reason for this is that host countries do not get enough international support to handle the arrival of large numbers of refugees.

Security Challenges.

Internally displaced refugees who relocate because of losing their homes or because their cities have been completely destroyed move to other cities inside their country are also considered at risk. They face similar problems to other refugees, such as danger on the way to school (UNICEF, 2015a). Girls face more problems that are dangerous since they can be kidnapped or sexually abused. Many children or adolescent refugees are working to support their families illegally; therefore, they are breaking the law. As a result, they are at risk of being arrested and imprisoned by the police (Mayer & Doyle, 2015). In addition, the

possibility of being unwelcome in the host country has resulted in harassment, discrimination and violence against them (Adam, 2015).

Administrative Challenges.

People in conflict zones whose houses have been demolished or who are forcibly moved out are unable to collect their personal documents. In such cases, refugees who have lost their papers and documents such as birth certificates, school certificates, grades and diplomas cannot enrol in school in their new homes. This results in them being out of school for long periods (Human Rights Watch, 2016a).

Institutional challenges.

Refugees face many problems in the schools of host countries. Language barriers are one of the most common problems (Brussels Conference Education Report, 2017); for example, in Syria the medium of instruction is Arabic at all educational stages up to college level, whereas in Lebanon and Turkey other languages are used (English, French and Turkish) (Human Rights Watch, 2016b). Additionally, refugees are unfamiliar with the host countries' curricula, which affects their academic performance and achievement (Brussels Conference Education Report, 2017). Unfortunately, the programs and certificates issued by some NGO schools are not accredited; therefore, refugees who studied in those schools cannot enter colleges. Moreover, countries that accepted refugees into the government schools such as Lebanon and Jordan are facing overcrowding in classrooms. Last but not least, refugee children might not be allowed to enrol in a school for age reasons. For instance, Syrian children in Jordan who are three years older than their peers are barred from formal education, based on the 'three-year rule' that bars school enrolment for all children who are older than their grade level by three years (Brussels Conference Education Report, 2017).

Possible Ways to Provide and Improve Education in Conflict Zones

As discussed earlier, children's education should be given the same priority as other basic needs i.e. food, water, shelter and protection, because through education children improve mentally, emotionally, psychologically and physically. Education reduces the dangerous consequences of conflict and helps them maintain hope and a positive mindset about the future. Hence, the educational programs, initiatives

and services offered in conflict-affected zones and host countries are highly significant in contributing a positive impact to the targeted people, provided that the initiatives are well-designed, well-planned and well-implemented. The following are suggestions for way to improve the implementation of educational programs discussed in the literature. This is followed by two case studies conducted with Palestinians and Syrian refugees residing in Malaysia.

End the conflict and Remove the Reasons for Conflict

The international community needs to increase its effort to force all conflicting parties in all locations to cease violence. All disputed issues should be solved through peaceful means and in a healthy, democratic way. The rights and differences of all people should be understood and respected. In this respect, educational programs and campaigns should be conducted to, “Raise people’s awareness about human rights, humanitarian law, tolerance, peaceful settlement of disputes and conflict management” (Breen, 2002). With regards to education, the international community must call for the de-politicization of schooling and ensure that the countries in conflict do not hinder children’s education. Premises used for teaching and learning should be made safe for both children and teachers (Abdel Ghafar & Masri, 2016).

Maintain the spirit of hope and determination among children

As mentioned earlier, during and after conflict, children are affected psychologically, due to the damage, horror and killings they have witnessed and experienced. They feel hopeless about the future; therefore, conflict-affected children need constant guidance and counselling to inspire them to maintain the spirit of hope and determination to secure a better future. Teachers, parents, governmental and non-governmental organizations can play a significant role in this respect. A good example can be seen in the Palestinians who have faced Israeli occupation that seeks to deprive them of education. Nevertheless, Palestinians consider, “education as their right, a means for liberation, and a venue for becoming part of the modern world” (Hussein, 2005).

Understand the context, obtain accurate data & establish a consultative process

The policymakers, program designers, and other significant stakeholders need to study the targeted areas before the implementation of any educational program (Education Development Center (EDC), 2017).

They should obtain accurate baseline-data on the numbers of children, schools, teachers and other facilities to increase awareness about the realities on the ground in targeted areas, and to satisfy the needs of children more effectively. At times, programs do not achieve their desired objectives due to insufficient information about the targeted context. If children feel that the program does not meet their needs or expectations, then the result will not be as expected or planned. Janke, EDC's Senior International Technical Advisor, further elaborates that, "Education is affected by the context in which it takes place, and it can also influence important local dynamics—for good or ill" (Education Development Center (EDC), 2017). He recommends that all agencies working in conflict zones should cooperate to meet the challenges and serve the young effectively (Io-Liyong, 2015).

Offer High Quality Programs, train teachers & create Secure Spaces

It is essential that refugee children improve their knowledge and develop their skills to resume their normal lives and meet the challenges facing them in the future. This can be achieved through offering high quality educational programs that are implemented well by trained and qualified teachers and facilitators, similar to those in other stable countries (Education Development Center (EDC), 2017). Therefore, teacher-training programs should be conducted to meet children's educational needs. For instance, a teacher-training program conducted in the Teachers' College at Columbia University in 2016 covered much needed educational areas including pedagogy, curriculum planning, teachers' roles and well-being, child protection, and inclusion (Ladika, 2017). In this vein, the World Economic Forum on Africa 2015 recommended that children need secure environments i.e. schools, centres, clubs etc., where they can play, interact and develop skills. Furthermore, they should be provided with the skills to successfully transition into adulthood. Conflict-affected children often experience interruptions in their education and then become too old to return to formal education. At the same time, these young people often lack the basic skills needed to secure jobs once the conflict has ended (Ladika, 2017). It is a good idea if the young children are asked to participate sharing their opinions about their needs and the quality of the educational program they are receiving. This will increase their confidence and at the same time help

them to develop better planning and decision-making skills (Ladika, 2017).

Offer a Holistic Approach to Learning

Creative Associates International has implemented many programs providing education to displaced students aged 6-17 in the conflict zones in Nigeria. They initiated a holistic approach to learning which included a psycho-social element, alongside basic education in reading and mathematics. They trained teachers on how to deal with students who have experienced trauma due to conflict. They also set up hundreds of informal learning centers in various places i.e. shelters, markets, churches, mosques and under the shade of trees to allow the young to learn (Okwonga, 2016).

Use Community-based Solutions

Teachers and other qualified people in conflict zones can assist as classroom facilitators to provide students with education. They can create appropriate environments for the children to learn, mainly in classrooms and can be supported by people, local organizations, and international organizations. The facilitators should be selected carefully in order to carry out the teaching task effectively since children in conflict zones are affected psychologically and need to be treated in special ways. This strategy was applied in Nigeria by the Creative Associates International in cooperation with the local community, in order to teach children and help in other related matters. Another good example is *al-ta'lim al-ash'abī* (informal teaching) that existed during the first Palestinian Intifada from 1987 to 1994. During the Intifada, the Israeli Occupation closed many schools and higher education institutions. Teachers were not able to reach their schools due to stringent curfews and occupation checkpoints. Teachers and students were harassed and arrested. The local communities opened their own houses and buildings, turning them into classrooms for school children and university students. This shows the high level of importance given to education by Palestinians who see it as a means of getting rid of the occupation and becoming part of the modern world (Hussein, 2005).

Case Study 1

The Syrian crisis has become one of the most dramatic cases of displacement in human history. Unfortunately, the conflict has entered its

sixth year without any imminent solution or signs of peace. According to UNICEF, the total number of the affected Syrians are 13.5 million, more than 6 million are under the age of 18. Around 6 million of Syrian have been forcibly uprooted from their homes and homeland, seeking shelter and safety as refugees in other neighbouring countries such as Lebanon, Iraq, Egypt, Turkey, and Jordan (UNICEF, 2017a). UNICEF asserts that around 3 million children in Syria and neighbouring countries are unable to go to school on a regular basis (UNICEF, 2017a; UNICEF, 2016b; UNICEF, 2015b).

Though Malaysia is not a signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention, thousands of refugees have arrived in Malaysia. According to the Malaysian Social Research Institute (MSRI), Syrian refugees began arriving in Malaysia in 2012, totalling 5000 in 2015 (Rong, 2016). However, there are no exact statistics on the actual number of Syrian refugees in Malaysia. Most of the Syrian refugees in Malaysia rely on Non-Government Organizations (NGOs) like MSRI for support (Malaysia Social Research Institute (MSRI), 2013). Syrian children and adolescent refugees under the authority of UNHRC are not allowed to register in Malaysian public schools. However, in 2015, the Malaysian government promised to provide shelter, jobs and access to education for a maximum of 3,000 Syrian refugees in Malaysia (Berita Malaysia, 2015).

This case study explores the perceptions of Syrian refugee adolescents on their current situation, future orientations, and hopes for the future (Ahmed, 2017). Semi-structured interviews were used to collect the data. Eleven (11) Syrian adolescent refugees residing in Malaysia, aged 14-19 years old and recorded under the authority of UNHCR participated in the study. Most of them were exposed to war for short periods either directly or indirectly. The thematic content analysis approach was used to analyse the collected data.

The findings demonstrate that Syrian adolescent refugees in Malaysia were directly exposed to war and the reintegration process has had a negative impact on their mental health. They claim to suffer from culture shock, having to deal with diverse culture, endure poverty and deal with problems related to their family, including financial and educational challenges. As a result, they experience sorrow, sadness, anxiety, instability, depression, denial, and negative adjustment to the new society as can be seen in the following narration:

We don't feel comfortable. I'm alive, and try to accept and make ourselves happy to feel relaxed and to accept our lives, but we aren't feeling comfortable

I'm not adapting and I'm very [sic] stressed and I feel alienated. No one comes to visit us and we don't visit anyone. Even my kids feel more than this...

As a refugee, I feel sorrow and sadness for the house I had to leave which was ours. We built that house with our own hands. It was ours! But here, we've gone through renting and changing houses for the first time, and we could not settle down so far. But our house in Syria, we built it ourselves. We'll never abandon it.

With regards to their education, several Syrian refugee parents believe that their stay in Malaysia is only temporary, so they do not attempt to place their children in school or higher education. Furthermore, most of the parents said that they do not have the financial resources to pay for school fees. At the same time, they felt it is very difficult to enrol their children in school, and the NGO schools do not provide appropriate or sufficient education for their children.

The majority of Syrian refugee children and adolescents attend NGO schools in Kuala Lumpur, with a few others attending International Arabic schools. Almost all of the participants believed that their schools in Syria are much better than the NGO schools in Malaysia. They added that in the NGO schools, the children face many challenges such as language barriers, differences in curriculum and diversity of nationality and culture. The schools do not offer extra-curricular activities. One of them described his school back home as follows:

It was amazing. I mean everyday going and seeing my friends. I miss those crazy things that I did. It was like so perfect, and the school was so amazing, yeah. I mean everything was perfect. Even there were some teachers, who would be a little bit mad sometimes but I miss all of them. I miss my school.

Out of the 11 participants, four of them were not attending school at all at the time the data was collected. One participant did not have documents to continue her studies in Malaysia, and finally she got married at the age of 17. Another girl who was facing financial problems was unable to obtain her school transcript to apply for a university place

after having graduated from high school. In addition, her family was not able to pay for her college fees. Two male students dropped out of school because they wanted to work and support their families. One of them said that the situation inside the NGO school was unsatisfactory:

I studied at school here for two years. I did not like the idea because the school I was in, was a UN (NGO) school, and all students knew that it was not a real school. It just wasted our time. The chaos was surrounding us, and there was no certificate.... Later I dropped out from school

After we had arrived in Malaysia, I was registered as a home-schooling student in an Arabic School here in Malaysia. I studied for two years in that school, I already graduated from high school but I wasn't going to be able to get my certificate because my family didn't have the money to pay the school fees for my last semester at school. Now there is anxiety because since I am a refugee I can't find universities that will accept me.

Unfortunately, those who registered in Arabic schools were no better off as they faced discrimination and bullying in school. At the same time, three of them were not formal students as they were registered as home school students. This was because they could not pay for the school fees. The school capacity was limited forcing the school administration to give priority to fee-paying students. In addition, not all participants who attended the Arabic schools adjusted well to the school as one of the explained:

As a refugee I'm subjected to racism, you don't have any right to talk. If a problem happened between you and another student, you're always blamed. We have a lot of racism.

Unfortunately, Syrian parents were unable to assist their children's adjustment to life in a new country. One participant asserted that their parents could not adjust to the new society either, due to cultural and social differences and feelings of insecurity. Additionally, as refugees, the parents were unable to assist in the education of their children causing more anxiety and stress about their children's future.

Until now, since I arrived from Syria, I haven't felt any progress in their future goals. I believe that my children have the ability to accomplish their goals, I'm worried and feel anxious because their future is put on hold because of

financial problems, only financial problems. I can't pay for the IELTS exam or the college fees. I feel I'm a failure because of that.

Honestly, I don't feel that my children can achieve their goals because there is no hope. In my view, no more hope, especially for my older kids because they have lost three years already. Even if we go to a new country, those three years that they've lost are going to affect them because they need to work hard and put more effort to graduate after not studying for three years.

In spite of the current situation, Syrian adolescent refugees are willing to invest great effort in order to achieve their future academic and career goals. Most of them plan for their future, and are determined and motivated to achieve their goals, believing that their future will be better, regardless of the location i.e. in Malaysia or elsewhere:

As a refugee I feel that my desire to achieve my goals is strong. No, I do not feel the opposite. I mean, I am persistent; I mean, I must do it. Because after going through danger and living as a refugee, I said that's what I must do.

The participants showed strong belief, hope and trust in Allah (SWT) that all their hardships will one day be over, as one said:

I still have hope. We all still have hope. Because I still have Allah (s.w.t) next to me. If I stay with Allah, then Allah will not make me disappointed. One day it will be like they say ... one day everything is going to be alright.

Additionally, parents and teachers' guidance, encouragement, and support play a substantial role in helping children and adolescents plan for their future. Societal support too is a fundamental resource for adolescents:

Yes, family is very important because the environment in which one is living does affect him constantly. I mean, maybe one does not feel this effect but it remains inside. Family and society can all help through encouragement.

As revealed by the research interviews, since conflict broke-out in their country, the Syrian refugees have been facing various types of difficulty and hardship, which have influenced, significantly, the education of children and adolescents. Nevertheless, they still hope for a better

future, emphasizing the role of parents, teachers, and the community in assisting them to overcome their psychological, mental, emotional and educational problems in order to achieve their future goals.

Case Study 2

One of the most challenging issues that Palestinian refugee families confront is providing education for their children. The following discussion is based on a case study conducted with 30 Palestinian refugee families who came to Malaysia and registered at the Office of United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and who are now wait for resettlement in a third country. Significantly, these families were forced to move from Iraq, Syria and the Gaza Strip to escape the horrors of war. The study explored the perceptions of those Palestinian refugees on their current situation and future orientations, mainly related to education. The data was collected using semi-structured interviews with the participants.

The study revealed that generally, the Palestinian refugee families have struggled to meet their basic needs, in particular, providing education for their children, which they viewed as one of the most challenging. The data indicates that some families have been staying in Malaysia for more than five years, yet their children remain absent from school, due to several reasons. In an interview with a Palestinian mother who moved from Iraq shows, that providing education for her children is the most important challenge she faces. She explains that she lives alone with her four children, after her husband migrated illegally to Australia. They await a family reunion. In this regard, she said:

I have the huge responsibility of taking care of four children. Arabic schools in Kuala Lumpur are expensive and this is a huge burden. Consequently, I send them to one of the NGO schools in KL to learn. I drive them to school and pick them up every day. After they come back home, I start teaching them.

For this mother, sending her children to the NGO School is the best available solution to the problem of her children's education. However, she pointed out that the school places students of different backgrounds, ages, gender and educational levels in one classroom. Needless to say, this situation has made her children become disappointed and

demanding. She places them in a regular school which she cannot afford. She said:

My children always ask me with frustration why they cannot go to a normal school like others. I noticed that my six-year old son became familiar with issues that are not his age. I can say that the school lacks an adequate educational environment. For example, teachers are mainly volunteers who might not have sufficient teaching experience. In this case, my child in level three only knows the days of the week in English and the teacher repeats the same lesson repeatedly. I am very sad for my children's future but I have no other options.

In another interview with a father from the same Palestinian community who moved from Iraq, he pointed out that he has two sons and two daughters. His eldest son is 15 years old, his daughter is 13, another son is 10 and another daughter is 9. All of them are of school age; however, none of them goes to school. The father proceeded to comment:

I do not want anything other than a satisfying school education for my children. I want them to go to school. I applied for the UNHCR in the hope of moving to a country where my children can obtain an education. The future of my children is the daily conversation topic among family members. In fact, I cannot register my children in Arabic schools and the main challenge is the expensive fees. I cannot send them to NGO schools because of the cost of transportation. Consequently, I send my two little children to a woman who lives in the same building to learn the letters and we try to teach them reading at home. For my older sons, they work to help me support the family and cover the basic household needs.

Similarly, some of the Palestinian families who came from Iraq moved from Syria. They face challenges in attending school. A 16-year old Palestinian boy coming from Syria mentioned that:

I wish I could join school, but I cannot because my brother and I work in restaurants to support our family. However, our wages are hardly enough to meet the basic needs, such as paying the monthly flat rent, utility bills and food. We wash dishes in a restaurant from 11 a.m. until 1 a.m. the next day.

In another interview with a grandfather, he expressed his concerns about the education of his grandchildren saying:

I am very concerned about my sons and their children. My eldest son has a child and tries to send him to a kindergarten to play and communicate with children of his age, but the tuition and transportation fees are very expensive. Can you imagine how difficult our life is? We cannot send one child to school. What would we do if we had many children and how could we deal with the situation?

In another case, a father pointed out that he has three young sons, 10, 7 and 2 years old. He sends them to an NGO school for education, even though he believes that they do not receive a good education. He believes that this school is only good for keeping his children away from the streets. In this regard, he said:

We live in tension and this way of living has affected us negatively. My children fight each other because they spend most of their time at home.

According to one of the participants:

We have lost everything because of the war in Syria. After I became sick, I stopped working and my children stopped their education to work in restaurants for more than 12 hours to cover the family's basic needs. We are refugees living in displacement just like what happened with our parents and grandparents after they were forced to leave Palestine in 1948 by the Israeli occupation.

A participant from the Gaza Strip described how her daughter is denied from registering in any school. The mother narrated the following account:

My eight-year old daughter is supposed to be in grade three now, but she does not have the chance to go to school. I sent her to the NGO School, but unfortunately, she could not adapt to the school environment there.

To understand the challenges of providing education for Palestinian refugee children, an interview was conducted with one of the NGO officials in Kuala Lumpur. She explained about the educational initiatives that her organization provides. In the beginning, she mentioned that her organization was one of the eleven operating organizations that work

with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in Malaysia. In addition, she remarked that the Ministry of Education in Malaysia does not officially recognize the schools for refugees. This is mainly because Malaysia does not recognize the 1951 Refugee Convention. However, it allows the UNHCR and other NGOs to provide educational services to refugee children because it signed the Convention of the Rights of the Child (CRC). In this regard, she said:

In fact, running the school is a challenge taken by us as the staff of the organization to support refugee children without being pay. We started with two classes to provide education for a few refugee children; one for primary and the other for secondary. However, the number of refugee students rapidly increased and almost reached 140. Later on, with limited space and resources we managed to open six more classes to absorb the students, putting students from Standards 1 and 2 together, Standards 3 and 4 together and Standards 5 and 6 together, recruiting refugee teachers and volunteers to teach the children. In fact, the school is not ideal but we opened it based on the principle that our education program is better than leaving children hanging out in the streets. If we received funding, we would assign one classroom for each standard; however, this is not easy to get.

She commented that refugee parents are interested in getting a good education for their children. Some of them expect the school system to deal with their children the way regular or international schools do. Some parents expressed their dissatisfaction with the limited support and resources provided for their children, while others choose not to send their children to the NGO school while awaiting resettlement in a third country. In this regard, she said:

Refugee families believe that once they resettle in a third country, everything will be fine, but it is the wrong idea. They must find their way during their life in Malaysia even with limited help. We always encourage students to do whatever they can do from learning, continue their education and do not stop attending or keep waiting for resettlement. Because if they stop coming to school in Malaysia, they will have a two or three year gap in their education which makes them too old to go to the same level after a resettlement and this is considered as a serious challenge to continue their education later on. This is why I do believe in what we are offering

in our school, despite challenges and limitations, it is better than nothing.

The findings reveal that the Palestinian refugees also face various difficulties, mainly in education. In addition to this, the NGOs face challenges that hinder them from providing education that is more satisfying for the refugee children.

Conclusion

This paper aimed to explore ways to provide education to conflict-affected children and the challenges to implementation and access to education. It also presented two short case studies conducted on Palestinian and Syrian refugees residing in Malaysia, to further explore their perceptions towards their current situation and future orientations in terms of education. The study has shown that the number of conflict-affected children is increasing significantly without hope for an immediate end in sight. The children of these refugees have been exposed to various types of trauma including education. Millions of them are out-of-school and face an uncertain future. The literature has documented that at the time of conflict or crisis, education is given less priority compared to other basic needs such as food, water, shelter and protection. However, governmental and non-governmental organizations have been offering a considerable number of educational initiatives, programs, projects and services to the conflict-affected school children inside and outside their own countries. There is a clear focus on refugee children coming from the Middle East, including Palestine, Syria, Iraq, and Yemen, in addition to Libya, Sudan and many others. The most common objectives among these organizations is to secure children's right to education by all possible means, regardless of location, race, gender, religion or economic status. This is done to equip them with the necessary knowledge and skills to be able to improve themselves, their families and society, now and in the future. Examples of these initiatives are No Lost Generation, Back-to-learning Campaigns, Expanded Learning Spaces, Self-learning, E-learning & Virtual School for Education in Crisis, the Accelerated Learning Program (ALP), Islamic Relief Worldwide initiatives/projects and many others. These initiatives have assisted significantly in children's education. However, there are challenges facing an effective implementation process, including the increasing number of out-of-school children, lack of precise data, shortage of funds, political issues, restricted local laws and regulations, continuation of conflict, children's

psychological, mental and economic problems, limited teaching spaces and a lack of mechanisms for cooperation among organizations or stakeholders. For the children and their families, the challenges can also be categorized into political, financial, psychological, economic, administrative or institutional factors, keeping in mind that each country has its own circumstances and conditions.

To provide and improve the implementation of education in conflict zones, all challenges should be considered. The literature suggests the following as examples; ending the conflict and removing the reasons for the conflict, maintaining the spirit of hope and determination among children, understanding the context, obtaining accurate data and establishing a consultative process, offering high quality programs, training teachers and creating secure premises, offering a holistic approach to learning and applying community-based solutions etc.

The two case studies reflect the refugees' perceptions on their current situation and future orientations in terms of education. The interview inputs were in-line with the findings of many reports in terms of refugees' educational demands, the roles of parents, teachers and the community and NGO challenges, and recommendations. Most importantly, the participants stressed the importance of being positive and engendering hope for a better quality of life in the future. Most participants have hope for the future, and even those who felt despair took comfort in their religious beliefs i.e. they overcame their negative feelings by trusting that Allah (S.W.T) will support them in overcoming their hardships. The study recommends an increase in efforts to meet the basic educational needs of conflict-affected children education and that these needs to be met using all possible means including the use of new and advanced instructional technology.

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In This Issue

Editorial

Special Articles

Md. Moniruzzaman

Politics of Forced Migration and Refugees: Dynamics of International Conspiracy?

AKM Ahsan Ullah and Diotima Chatteraj

Roots of Discrimination Against Rohingya Minorities: Society, Ethnicity and International Relations

Kamal J. I. Badrasawi, Iman Osman Ahmed and Iyad M. Eid

Exploring Ways to Provide Education in Conflict Zones: Implementation and Challenges

Ibrahim O. Salawu and Aluko Opeyemi Idowu

Political Settlement Analysis of the Blight of Internally Displaced Persons in the Muslim World: Lessons from Nigeria

Research Articles

Rohaiza Rokis

Women's Work Empowerment through "Re-upcycle" Initiatives for Women-at-home

Shafizan Mohamed and Tengku Siti Aisha Tengku Mohd Azzman

The Islamization of the Malaysian Media: A Complex Interaction of Religion, Class and Commercialization

Suleyman Temiz

Rise of Central Conservatism in Political Leadership: Erdogan's National Outlook Movement and the 1997 Military Coup in Turkey

Maskanah Mohammad Lotfie and Hartono

Language Policy and Practices in Indonesian Higher Education Institutions

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