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From the Editor



The Moral Recalibration: Malaysia and the Global South at a Turning Point

This second issue of *Frontier* surveys a world undergoing moral recalibration. From Gaza's endurance to Kashmir's forgotten plebiscite, and Malaysia's trade shock under U.S. tariffs, global politics is no longer defined by power alone but by a struggle for legitimacy. Our contributors write from the frontlines of that shift—where principle, not posture, has become the new measure of influence.

Prime Minister **Anwar Ibrahim's** address at the Emergency Arab–Islamic Summit in Doha anchors this issue, both in spirit and in substance. Delivered days after Israeli airstrikes reached the Qatari capital, his declaration that “condemnations will not stop the missiles; declarations will not free Palestine” marked a decisive turn from moral outrage to moral statecraft. By publicly endorsing the Sumud Flotilla—Malaysia's citizen-led humanitarian mission sailing toward Gaza—Anwar transformed solidarity into strategy. The flotilla's decentralised coordination and quiet coherence embodied a new kind of diplomacy: one guided less by bureaucracy than by conscience, less by command than by connection.

We begin with Malaysia's Mediation: Middle Power, Moral Voice by **Dr Syed Azman Syed Ahmad Nawawi**, IAIS CEO, and **Nur Najah Mohd Dali**, IAIS Research Associate, which situates Malaysia's plural identity and principled non-alignment as the foundation of its credibility. **Dr Ahmad Badri Abdullah**, IAIS Deputy CEO, follows with *A Long-Delayed Recognition*, documenting a historic shift as Western powers—led by Britain, France, and Canada—finally recognise the State of Palestine. His analysis reads as both vindication and warning: recognition without enforcement risks repeating the failures of the past. In *Kashmir: Nation and People Abandoned by the World*, **Dr Abdul Latiff Mohd Ibrahim**, IAIS Head of Research and Editor-in-Chief, traces the eerie symmetry between Kashmir and Palestine—two occupied lands sustained by the same architecture of erasure and silence.

Wan Naim Wan Mansor, (IAIS Research Fellow), revisits Malaysia's maritime mission in Sumud Flotilla as a living system of resilience. The Arabic term *sumud*—steadfastness—emerges not as defiance alone but as an ethic of

adaptive endurance: a networked form of moral feedback that reconfigures itself when structures collapse. **Michelle Kimball** (Senior Research Fellow at PEDIXS, IIUM), examines shifting geopolitical alignments in Are Israel and the U.S. Bracing for a Wider War with Iran?, situating the Gaza crisis within a broader reconfiguration of deterrence and legitimacy. **Muhamad Sayuti Mansor**, (IAIS RF), in From Trump's Peace Plan to Power Politics, exposes how "peace" has been repurposed into coercion, while **Muhammad Azhar Mohamad** (IAIS Analyst), in How Films Reframe the Palestinian Struggle and Western Conscience, shows how cinema, from No Other Land to The Voice of Hind Rajab, is reclaiming the narrative space where diplomacy has failed.

Muhammad Syameer Luthfy (RF at IINTAS, IIUM), in Rohingya: The World's Forgotten Refugees, reveals the limits of a regional order trapped between sovereignty and silence, urging Malaysia—as the chair of ASEAN—to lead a shift from procedural diplomacy to principled leadership consistent with MADANI values. In Travel Ban and the IDF: Rights Without Recourse, **Norliza Saleh** (IAIS RF), spotlights Malaysia's civil-society awakening through an interview with humanitarian Michelle Sharmini, founder of the Travel Ban IDF campaign. What began as a citizen petition now gestures toward policy: a call to deny safe haven to those complicit in genocide, asserting that justice at home is inseparable from security abroad.

Finally, **Nur Najah Mohd Dali**, in Hit by 25% Tariffs (now revised to 19%): Should Malaysia Go Deeper into the Muslim World?—based on IAIS's podcast dialogue with economist Dr Wan Hasni Wan Suleiman—translates economic adversity into strategic renewal. It argues that Malaysia must evolve from dependence on foreign investment toward indigenous innovation and South-South cooperation, linking Islamic finance with Gulf-led technological frontiers. In an age of radical uncertainty, resilience—not prediction—will decide who endures.

Across these pages runs a single truth: the Global South is no longer pleading for justice; it is designing it. From flotillas to travel bans, from diplomatic reform to economic realignment, nations like Malaysia are proving that moral conviction can be institutionalised into policy. The task now is to ensure that this awakening of conscience becomes the foundation of a new rules-based order—one measured not by might, but by moral coherence.



Abdul Latiff Mohd Ibrahim (Editor-in-Chief)

Head of Research and Publications at International
Institute of Advanced Islamic Studies (IAIS)

ROHINGYA: THE WORLD'S FORGOTTEN REFUGEES

By Muhammad Syameer Luthfy Hamzah



In September 2025, as global attention fixates on conflicts in Gaza and Ukraine, the Rohingya crisis in Myanmar remains a stark example of a humanitarian emergency relegated to the margins of international consciousness. Eight years after the 2017 mass exodus from Rakhine State, where over 700,000 Rohingya fled a military campaign described by the United Nations as bearing the hallmarks of genocide, approximately 1.5 million Rohingya languish in

camps in Bangladesh's Cox's Bazar, the world's largest refugee settlement. Conditions are dire, marked by funding shortfalls, escalating insecurity, and a lack of durable solutions. This article examines the reasons behind the global and regional "forgetting" of the Rohingya, analyses local dynamics in host countries like Malaysia, and proposes mitigation strategies, drawing on recent reports and the broader geopolitical context, including the July 2025 Cambodia-Thailand border

conflict over ancient temples, which underscores ASEAN's challenges in managing regional crises. Particular emphasis is placed on Malaysia's pivotal role as the 2025 ASEAN Chair, where it has faced mounting calls to lead regional efforts toward resolution.



A Crisis Rooted in Persecution and Displacement

The Rohingya, a Muslim minority in Myanmar's predominantly Buddhist Rakhine State, have faced decades of systemic discrimination, including denial of citizenship under the 1982 Citizenship Law and restrictions on movement, education, and livelihoods. The 2017 military crackdown, involving mass killings, arson, and sexual violence, displaced

over a million to Bangladesh, joining earlier refugee waves. The 2021 military coup in Myanmar further destabilized the region, igniting a civil war that has displaced an additional 534,000 people in Rakhine State since November 2023, with Rohingya caught in clashes between the junta and the Arakan Army. Access to healthcare in northern Rakhine is nearly non-existent, with destroyed facilities exacerbating conditions like HIV and tuberculosis.

In Cox's Bazar, 1.2 million

Rohingya live in overcrowded camps behind barbed wire, facing violence, kidnappings, and forced recruitment by armed groups. Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) reported treating 83 violence-related injuries between August 5 and 17, 2024, nearly half involving women and children.



Why the Rohingya Crisis is Being Forgotten

The marginalization of the Rohingya crisis stems from both global and local factors. Internationally, conflicts like Gaza and Ukraine dominate media and aid budgets, leaving the Rohingya in the shadows. Funding for Cox's Bazar has plummeted, with aid agencies warning of an impending collapse. Refugees International noted in July 2024 that the crisis risks being "forgotten" seven years after 2017, as donor fatigue and shifting priorities take hold. However, this "forgetting" is not merely a matter of oversight; it is compounded by local resentments in host countries, where initial compassion has eroded due to socioeconomic pressures.

In Muslim-majority Malaysia and Indonesia, the Islamic concept of Ummah (community) and Fardu Kifayah (collective obligation) initially spurred solidarity, akin to widespread Malaysian support for Gaza. Yet, public sentiment has shifted due to perceptions of Rohingya dependency. Unlike

Bangladeshi migrants, who often take up labour-intensive jobs, some Rohingya are seen as preferring to beg, straining the Malaysian cultural value of Kasihan (compassion). This aligns with Maslow's hierarchy of needs, where failure to progress from basic provisions (food, shelter) to self-sufficiency fuels host fatigue. In Indonesia's Aceh province, protests in late 2023 and 2024 saw students blame Rohingya for youth unemployment, citing competition for low-wage jobs in a post-tsunami recovery context. Social media disinformation has amplified these tensions, with right-wing groups targeting refugees and UN agencies.

Globally, the crisis's invisibility is exacerbated by ASEAN's non-interference principle, which prioritizes sovereignty over humanitarian

intervention. Despite the 2021 Myanmar coup intensifying violence, ASEAN's response remains limited to calls for ceasefires and humanitarian access, with no enforceable outcomes. Dialogues with Myanmar's junta, particularly during Malaysia's ASEAN chairmanships in 2015 and 2025, have yielded minimal progress. This inertia contrasts with more visible regional conflicts, such as the July 2025 Cambodia-Thailand border clashes, which drew

“ This ‘forgetting’ is not merely a matter of oversight; it is compounded by local resentments in host countries, where initial compassion has eroded due to socioeconomic pressures. ”

“ The marginalization of the Rohingya crisis stems from both global and local factors. ”



ASEAN Uneven Response and Host Country Challenges

SEAN's handling of the Rohingya crisis highlights structural weaknesses in regional governance, particularly when contrasted with its response to the July 2025 Cambodia-Thailand border conflict over the Preah Vihear and Prasat Ta Muen Thom temples. That conflict, rooted in colonial-era border ambiguities from the 1904-1907 Franco-Siamese treaties, escalated into heavy fighting on July 24, 2025, killing at least 38 people and displacing over 300,000 across both countries. A ceasefire was brokered by Malaysia on July

28, with mediation supported by the United States and China, demonstrating ASEAN's capacity for rapid response when geopolitical stakes are high. Yet, no comparable urgency has been applied to the Rohingya, despite similar displacement scales and ongoing violence in Myanmar.

Malaysia, hosting 150,000 to 200,000 Rohingya (over 58% of its refugee population), faces significant strain. Foreign Minister of Malaysia Datuk Seri Mohamad Hasan noted in August 2025 that many entered illegally, stretching resources. Unlike 1951 Refugee Convention signatories, Malaysia classifies Rohingya as asylum seekers without formal rights, leading to ad hoc policies that permit work but expose them to exploitation. The Philippines, by contrast, has resettled around 30 Rohingya since 2019 through its Complementary Pathways program, with eight arriving in July 2025 for education. Timor-Leste hosts negligible numbers, with global reports

estimating 2.9 million refugees needing resettlement in 2025 but lacking specific data. Malaysia's disproportionate burden underscores its humanitarian commitment but also fuels local resentment.

Thailand, sharing a 2,416 km border with Myanmar (longer than its 1,845 km border with





Laos), has avoided escalation over Rohingya inflows, partly through pushbacks violating non-refoulement principles. Unlike the Cambodia-Thailand conflict, which involved airstrikes and rocket fire over culturally significant temples, Myanmar's crisis has not triggered regional spill over, reflecting ASEAN's reluctance to confront the junta. This contrast highlights a prioritisation of territorial disputes over humanitarian crises, as temple clashes garnered swift mediation while Rohingya displacement languishes.

Local perceptions further complicate support. In Malaysia, early solidarity for Rohingya mirrored Gaza advocacy, but reports of begging and perceived refusal to integrate have diminished *Kasih*. This perception, while not universal, fuels a narrative that Rohingya are burdens, undermining their progression up Maslow's hierarchy from basic needs to self-actualisation. In Aceh, economic competition narratives have similarly shifted attitudes, with 2024 protests reflecting fears of job losses. These dynamics underscore the need for policies that address both refugee and host community needs.

Malaysia's role as the 2025 ASEAN Chair, since January 1 under the theme "Inclusivity and Sustainability," has amplified its centrality in addressing the crisis. As Chair, Malaysia has been urged by regional stakeholders to leverage its position for stronger coordination on Myanmar, including the Rohingya issue. Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim has signalled a potential shift, emphasising compassion and leadership in hosting refugees despite junta opposition. By June 2025, Malaysia had begun steering ASEAN toward a "new direction" on Myanmar, including calls for

inclusive national dialogues and trust-building processes. Bangladesh, bearing the brunt of the refugee influx, has repeatedly appealed to Malaysia in 2025, with Chief Adviser Professor Dr. Muhammad Yunus seeking its influence to rally international efforts and resolve the crisis during meetings in August. He highlighted Malaysia's experience hosting Rohingya and its ASEAN leadership as uniquely positioning it to push for concrete, region-wide solutions. The ASEAN Parliamentarians for Human Rights (APHR) echoed these calls in August 2025, urging Malaysia to restore lifesaving aid, uphold non-refoulement, and avoid legitimizing the junta, warning of regional instability if the crisis deepens. Advocacy groups like the Rohingya Rights Advocacy Network have also pressed Malaysia to end the genocide and restore democracy in Myanmar, appealing directly to Anwar. Upcoming events, such as the 15th ASEAN Ministerial Meeting on Transnational Crime in September 2025, could provide platforms for advancing these dialogues. However, critics note that while Malaysia has promoted digital transformation and intra-ASEAN trade under its chairmanship, tangible progress on the Rohingya remains limited, constrained by ASEAN's consensus-based decision-making.

Revising Policies and Fostering Regional Action

Addressing the Rohingya crisis requires a multi-pronged approach. First, ASEAN must strengthen its commitment to non-refoulement, ensuring asylum seekers are not returned to Myanmar's unsafe conditions. For earning refugees,

voluntary repatriation could be incentivized once safety is assured, but forced returns risk human rights violations. MSF advocates compliance with international humanitarian law, prioritizing impartial aid and civilian protection.

Malaysia's 2025 ASEAN chairmanship offers a platform to elevate the crisis. Special dialogues with Myanmar representatives, building on past efforts, could push for humanitarian corridors and ceasefire enforcement. Digital transformation programs, such as skills training for refugees, could reduce dependency perceptions and foster integration. Internationally, funding for Cox's Bazar must increase, with 2025 resettlement quotas—projected at historic lows—needing expansion through pressure from the U.S. and others.

From an Ummah perspective, reframing Rohingya support as Fardu Kifayah could reinvigorate advocacy in Malaysia and Indonesia, emphasizing collective responsibility without overburdening hosts. Long-term solutions include advancing ICJ/ICC accountability and investing in Rakhine's development to enable safe returns.

Malaysia could further lead by convening a dedicated ASEAN task force on the Rohingya, integrating Bangladesh's input and APHR recommendations into actionable plans. This might include regional burden-sharing

mechanisms, enhanced border cooperation with Thailand, and diplomatic pressure on the junta for inclusive dialogues. By demonstrating "leadership through compassion," as urged by stakeholders, Malaysia can transform its chairmanship into a catalyst for sustainable resolution.

Toward Renewed Focus and Sustainable Solutions

The Rohingya crisis, emblematic of forgotten refugees, demands urgent action. While global distractions and local resentments have dimmed focus, Malaysia's 2025 ASEAN leadership offers a chance to reframe the issue. By balancing humanitarian imperatives with economic integration, upholding non-refoulement, and fostering regional dialogues, ASEAN can mitigate this tragedy. With over 2 million Rohingya displaced worldwide, forgetting is a choice that must be reversed through concerted, inclusive action.



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