

INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS DYNAMICS TOWARDS TURKEY'S MIGRATION POLICY REGARDING SYRIAN REFUGEE

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ABSTRACT

Syrian refugee and asylum seeker have become a major topic in international migration over the past few years. The conflict that has not yet shown a sign of its end, makes millions of people left with no choice other than going out from their home town, as their home has become a warfare. Turkey is one of the countries that accepts most of this refugees and asylum seeker. Thus, this paper intended to analyze the reason behind this country's policy regarding Syrian refugees and asylum seeker, by using the concept of the Factors Influencing the Policy Responses of Host Governments to Mass Refugee Influxes particularly the international relations variable. This paper proposed a research question, how the international relations has impacted Turkey's policy in responding to Syrian refugees. This qualitative research data is gathered from the secondary sources. This study finds that international relations variable impacted the policy choice in the sense that the change in the relationship between Turkey and Syria, EU - Turkey as well as the norm and dynamic in international refugee regime resulted in the change of Turkey's policy.

Keywords: Mass Refugee Influxes, Syrian refugee, Turkey's policy,

Introduction

Syrian civil war has become the main causes of the migration of thousands of people from Syria. The conflict that was primarily started as an implication of the Arab Spring back in 2011, continued over the past years, creating another dynamics as the number of actors involved has increased.

Even though the refugee influxes have flown around the world, most of the asylum seeker and refugees spread across middle eastern countries. Among countries with the highest refugees acceptance rate were the Republic of Turkey, Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan and the Lebanese Republic. Turkey became the country which had received the most of Syrian refugees, with total number of refugees reach 1,7 million peoples as of 2015 (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2016). According to the data of IOM, at the end of

2015 over 2.5 million people sought contemporary protection or asylum within Turkey's borders – primarily Syrians, Iraqis, or Afghans (IOM, 2016).

Since 2015 people had seen a shift in Turkish foreign policy, where the open door policy was started to be questioned. It was questioned because Turkey had never admit that they change their policy, claiming that their border was still open, while the fact on the field indicated that Turkey had unofficially adopted the closed border policy.

Nonetheless, it would be no surprise on Turkey's open-door policy if we had learned from the past. Historically, Turkey has a unique dynamic of policy when it comes to accepting refugees. In the ancient time, before it changed into a republic, during the rule of Ottoman Empire, it used to be very open with refugees. The Ottoman Empire was very open towards refugees, regardless their beliefs, nations of origin and such. For as long as they want to comply with rule the empire has, would help the empire in strengthening their security and would contribute to the economic development of the empire, then they were welcomed (Latif, 2002).

In the modern days, Turkey sometimes accept refugees, while the other time they decided to apply the closed-door policy towards the refugees. This is making sense, since, although Turkey is a party to the 1951 Convention, it accepts the convention with geographical limitations. In 2015, the changing of Turkey's policy toward refugees, based on David Lepaska (2015) explanation that it started with the victory of AKP (Justice and Development Party), a moderate conservative party as single ruling party, as well as the victory of Recep Tayyip Erdogan in the presidential election in 2014.

In the Middle East geopolitical landscape where there is a growing tension between Saudi Arabia and Iran, Turkey has been successful in maintaining close relationship with both side. Turkey wants not only to balance the power of two major actors in region, but also wants to minimize the influence of the United States by pursuing their own pattern of foreign policy, including trying new approach with Russia.

In his book, Baskan (2016) explained that the US promotion of democracy in the Middle East has put neither Qatar nor Turkey in an uncomfortable position. Both responded the shifting on the regional political landscape in post 9/11 and Arab Springs era by pursuing more active foreign policies.

Noting that there has been a shift in Turkey's foreign policy in accepting Syrian refugee, it is interesting to see the dynamics of the both relationship between Turkey and Syria and Erdogan and Assad personal relationship. Within the personal relationship domain, Assad and Erdogan shared good personal ties starting in early 2000s when Erdogan was serving as the Prime Minister of Turkey. From that years on, Erdogan and Assad had maintained a close relationship, resulting in a lot of partnership and cooperation between Turkey and Syria. The relationship between the two then has worsened since Arab Springs 2011 when Assad brutal reaction to the demonstrators and other state-sponsored violence actions on the following years. As a president, Erdogan opposed Assad and taking military means to backed the Sunni rebel groups against Assad. Furthermore, a stalemate conflict between rebels groups and Assad forces, the rising of Kurdistan Workers' Party as well as ISIS, and new

Russia approach to the conflict make a new move to Erdogan to re-connecting good relations with Assad, a U-turn moves. However, Andrew Wilks (2019) explained that most observers feel the once-close ties between Erdogan and Assad have been damaged and less likely to be repaired, the future dynamics of this relation may depend on the outcome of Syrian presidential election.

Meanwhile, the unsteadiness of the relationship between EU and Turkey also play significant role within the dynamics of Turkey's migration policy. Most EU members criticize Turkey's active foreign policy in Middle East. However, EU also needs Turkey to be the buffer zone, before migrants reach EU member state territories.

In this paper, we argue that Turkey uses the migration issue as one of their bargaining power to EU amid EU critics on Turkey foreign policies. Therefore, this paper poses a question "how the international relations has impacted Turkey's policy in responding to Syrian refugees?"

Methods

This research is conducted with qualitative method, using secondary data sources gathered from journals, reports, and other reliable articles. The interpretation of data would be conducted after categorization, reduction and condensation of data phases as the sequences of the analytical data had accomplished done by researchers. The purpose of this research is to deepen the understanding about international migration, specifically about the behavior of the state that receive the mass refugee influxes. In general, this research is conducted to develop knowledge in the humanities and social field. Thus, this research is a descriptive

research.

The concept that is used in order to explain this phenomenon is “Factors Influencing the Policy Responses of Host Governments to Mass Refugee Influxes” that is written by Karen Jacobsen in 1996. This concept is chosen since it has the specific approach of analyzing the behaviour of a country that receive mass refugee influxes.

Jacobsen (1996) argues that there are four main variables that affect country’s behaviour in responding to mass refugee influxes. The first variable is bureaucratic choices. Bureaucratic choices matter since a policy is seen as an outcome of political choices. The second variable is international relations. International relations matters in the sense that although the decision made is for the state alone, it could not be separated with the international context. The third variable is the absorption capacity of the local host community. The context of absorption is both willingness and ability of the local host community in accepting refugees. The fourth is national security consideration. This variable is indeed very popular towards the host country’s policy regarding refugees. There are three indicators that affect this variable, namely military, environment and social economics.

Aforementioned, the concept from Jabobsen such a complex concept. In this paper, the writers limited the scope of analysis to describe policy through international relations variable regarding the important interpretation of Turkey policy on migration. As we introduce before, the international regime, geopolitical situation and the dynamic of Turkey and Syria relationship are considered to be the factor affecting the policy choice.

Discussion

Turkey, although is a party to the 1951's convention, still holds this convention with geographical limitations. Which means that the only people that could be considered as a refugee is those who come from Europe. Otherwise, Turkey cannot consider people seeking for asylum as a refugee, unless stated by another body (which here refer to an international organization/international agency) namely United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (Memisoglu & Ilgit, 2016). This makes the UNHCR plays major role in Turkey's policy on asylum seeker and refugees.

Specifically, on the case of Syrian refugee, Turkey's government was initially rejected any international help while responding to the mass influx. It was just in 2002 where Ahmed Davutoglu ask for an international help (Gökalp Aras & Şahin Mencütek, 2015), when the cost of hosting these Syrian asylum seekers has become a burden for Turkey. The UNHCR was finally able to access the camp of these people on February 2012 (Gökalp Aras & Şahin Mencütek, 2015). As of that time, UNHCR has fully involved in the Syrian refugee and asylum seeker management. UNHCR involvement has helped Turkey's government in many ways while dealing with this problem and make Turkey still be able to accept the refugee, since the UNHCR is helping them in assisting the refugee and asylum seeker.

Other than UNHCR, the regional refugee regime also gave a profound impact in Turkey's policy. The regional regime that considered to play an important role is the European Union. As the EU is limiting the numbers of refugees that can reach EU, the responsibility of managing asylum seeker has

been somehow transferred to the non-EU countries (Memisoglu & Ilgit, 2016).

EU applies policies like creating buffer zone, strengthen the control over its border, to reduce the number of irregular migrations, while also taking full control for mixed migration by signing readmission agreement, and creating concepts like 'safe third country' or 'safe country of origin' (Memisoglu & Ilgit, 2016). In accordance to this, Turkey's policy in managing refugee, has been made in order to meet EU standard. More than that, Turkey is also in a way forced to accept the refugees and asylum seekers, as EU is giving them aid and help, to ensure that they take care of the migrants and ensuring that the migrant is not going to EU. On the side of Turkey, it becomes their bargaining to the EU members that continuously posed critical protests to the Turkey's foreign policies.

This also shows the dynamic within the global refugee regime, where there are rejections (although not clearly stated) from actors towards refugees. This is different than the conditions happen during the cold war where refugee was seen as a very important matter because of the ideological background, now days refugee is considered as a burden to states, thus some states are making certain policies that is actually meant to limit refugee flows (Memisoglu & Ilgit, 2016), as well as their bargaining.

This situation creates implications toward smaller state, with lower level of influence, which also largely dependent towards those bigger states. These smaller states are left with the refugees, with those big states promising to give them aids in order to solve the refugee problem. These small states with lesser influence left with no choice, since they need the help and assistance from the

bigger states, also they are afraid with the reputation sanctions that they could receive if they decided not to accept the refugees and asylum seeker.

Another way to prove the influence of the global refugee regime is the fact that Turkey has changed the status of those Syrian migrants seeking for asylum in Turkey. At the first place, the status given for them is a guest (as Turkey needs UNHCR to grant these people status of refugees), but this terminology has no stance in international law (Gökalp Aras & Şahin Mencütek, 2015). Turkey then changed their status into temporary protection status, as based on the European Union (Council) directive regarding temporary protection (Gökalp Aras & Şahin Mencütek, 2015).

The second indicator that considered as important in terms of international relations is the relations between the sending and receiving countries. The dynamic of Turkey and Syria relationship cannot be separated with the domestic politics condition of these countries. The relationship between the two has just entered a better chapter since 2000. Before that, the relationship dynamic of these two states is dominated by enmity instead of amity due to disagreement in certain issues such as the Hatay territorial disputes, Syrian decision to support Kurdish Working Party (PKK), differences in affiliation during the cold war as well as water resource disputes (Gökalp Aras & Şahin Mencütek, 2015).

The normalization of these two states relationship begun when Turkish president come to the funeral of the late Syrian president, Hafez Al Assad. The death of Hafez Al Assad, and the coronation of Bashar Al Assad (Hafez Al Assad's son), is believed to bring a new chapter of Turkey and Syria relationship.

The policy orientation of Bashar Al Assad which is more opened and wanting to have more economic and political engagement with Turkey (Aras, 2012), marks the beginning of a better relationship between Turkey and Syria. One of the most influential decision is Syria's decision to stop supporting the Kurdish Worker Party (PKK), closing their camps and radios, stopping those anti Turkey news and opinion columns, and also restricting PKK member to join the elections.

As an implication of this and as a part of their reciprocal action as a response towards what Syria has done, Turkey then decided to build a stronger cooperation with Syria. One of the examples of this cooperation is the agreement to start military cooperation in terms of security protocol as of 2001 and also the agreement to start joint training since June 2002 (Aras, 2012). Other than military cooperation, these two neighbors had agreed to make more economic cooperation under the considerations that economic cooperation would be beneficial for both states.

Within this period of time, there is also changes in the domestic politics situation of Turkey. Adalet ve Kalkinma Partisi or internationally recognized as AKP but preferred to call themselves AK Party take the rulings in Turkey. Since then, Turkey become more engaging toward the middle east. Turkey capitalize their soft powers namely culture, kinship, religion as well finance and trade as their means in their interaction with Middle Eastern countries (Aras, 2012). This behavior is reflected by the motto of Turkish foreign policy under Ahmet Davutoglu, "zero problems with neighbors". Through this policy, Turkey hopes that they would be recognized as the new regional power.

Along the years, Turkey is successfully conducted a lot of cooperation

with Middle Eastern countries. Particularly in their relations with Syria, Turkey assert that Syria is not their friends, but instead, a brother. This is said by the Prime Minister (then president), Recep Tayyip Erdogan. In terms of trade, the relationship between the two countries has also become bigger. As of 2010, the trade volume between these two countries has read \$ 1.84 billion (Aras, 2012). In addition to this, the number of Syrian tourists visiting turkey also increase for almost five times higher than in 2003, where as of 2010 the number of Syrian tourists visiting Turkey reach 500,000 (Aras, 2012). This success in building soft power has made Turkish position increased in the eyes of Middle Eastern country, which obviously includes Syria. Turkey even have become a mediator for Israel and Syria trust. This indicates the growing recognition for Turkey within the region.

These situation shows that before the breakout of the crisis, Turkey and Syrian relationship were in the best terms. Therefore, when the first time the crisis had break up in Syria, Turkey expect that their close ties with Syria would help and make a significance in resolving the conflict. Efforts then made by Turkish government to convince Bashar Al Assad to step down from his position, some of these included Davutoglu visit to Syria and a call by Erdogan for Assad, asking him to step down (Gökalp Aras & Şahin Mencütek, 2015). Turkey then also apply open door policy as they expect that Syrian refugee would not lasts for too long. This is shown in Turkish statement that they accept Syrian people coming to their territory as a guest (Gökalp Aras & Şahin Mencütek, 2015) and expect that they would be returning to their home country once the conflict is solved.

However, this initiative had failed and the relationship between these two countries has worsened. Turkish government decided to change its policy towards Syria, by announcing that Turkey recognize the Syrian National Council as the representative of Syria (Gökalp Aras & Şahin Mencütek, 2015). This brave decision then continued by Turkey cutting their diplomatic ties with Syria. This marks the declining relationship between these two countries, and the two is officially back into the point where they are enemy. During this term, Turkey is still open towards refugees, granting them temporary protection status, with the expectations that the opposition would overthrow the regime soon (Gökalp Aras & Şahin Mencütek, 2015).

By mid-2012 to 2013, after several incidents in Turkey and Syrian borders, Turkey asked the United Nations Security Council to establish a buffer zone and to take military actions to Syria if necessary. This stage marks the worst stage of Turkey and Syrian relationship, where Turkey already considers Syria as a serious threat towards their national security (Gökalp Aras & Şahin Mencütek, 2015). The implication of this is Turkey's decision to register the refugee and adopted the unofficial 'close door' policy (Gökalp Aras & Şahin Mencütek, 2015). The unofficial close door policy means that Turkey never stated officially that they are closing their border with Syria, but the fact in the field said so. This situation has continuously happened until today, since the conflict in Syria is not yet ended, which means that people would still come and seek for asylum while the current existing refugees and people seeking asylum which already in Turkey would not be able to come home. Aforementioned, the U-turn of Turkey relations towards Syria made a significant dynamic both state

relations and migrant policy.

Meanwhile, Turkey's long effort to enter European Union membership has not been successful until Turkey agrees to apply additional protocol regarding Cyprus. As of today, the status of Turkey in EU membership has not been upgraded from a candidate country. Pascala Davies (2019) reported that the conclusion of EU summit in October 2019, the EU urged Turkey to withdraw from the region (Syria – Iraq - Cyprus) and agreed to suspend the sales and exports of arms to Turkey.

However, EU has not been able to put the full pressure on Turkey. It is because Turkey still serves as their strategic partner to manage certain important issues, such as migration and counter-terrorism. It can be proved by the role of Turkey that hosted millions of refugees and potentially managed the ISIS detainees. "The worst scenario" if Turkey is no longer as the host country for immigrant, the immigrant influx will massively enter the EU's countries, creating insecurity for the EU members. This is one of the most serious concern of EU in their policy against Turkey.

Conclusion

It could be concluded that Turkey's policy factor regarding Syrian refugee is the international relation variable. In terms of international refugee regime, the dynamic largely affect Turkey's decision to accept those seeking asylum and the assistance from respective organization helps Turkey in managing refugee better. The context between EU – Turkey relations also became main consideration which migration issues became a bargaining power

of Turkey. The dynamic within Turkey and Syria also gave a profound implication toward the policy choice, where it could be seen when the relationship was still in a good term, Turkey open their border freely, while as the situation worsened, Turkey then unofficially adopted the close border policy particularly for Syrian refugees.

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