

# TURKEY'S 'OPEN-DOOR' REFUGEE POLICY: ANALYSIS THROUGH POWER-ELITE MODEL

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## **Abstract:**

*Syrian civil war emerged with its domestic instabilities and caused regional instability and mass migration from Syria to other neighbouring countries. Turkey became the country which is hosting the largest number of Syrian refugees by applying 'open-door' policy. According to the Directorate General of Migration Management, the number of registered refugee under temporary protection is almost 3.5 million till 2018. Through the adoption of 'Law on Foreigners and International Protection', access to public healthcare, education for children, access to labour market- these have been eased for the Syrians under temporary protection regime. Turkish policy for the Syrian refugees received huge applause in terms of humanitarian consideration. But it also faced criticism that Turkey is utilizing the cheap Syrian labour and the government intends to maintain ethnic balance with Shiite Alwais and Alevis. From 2018, the modification in citizenship law with the provision of 'Citizenship by Investment' infused the debate of the intention behind the 'open-door' policy of the government of Justice and Development Party (AKP). This article is aimed to evaluate the factors behind this Turkish policy with the analytical framework of Power Elite Model.*

**Keywords:** Regime, 'Open-door', AKP, Power Elite, Refugee, Asylum

## **INTRODUCTION**

The transcontinental country of Eurasia with ancient history of Anatolian Peninsula which is significant not only in geographical feature but also as a fusion of Western and Middle Eastern culture -Turkey, has always been considered as a significant strategic player in global politics. The glorious long rooted history of Ottoman empire, abolition of monarchy by Kemal Atartuk and Kemalist ideology of Secularism- all these have made Turkish culture and politics so distinct in nature that it has been named as fertile crescent of Human history. The world has seen two distinct ideologies in this transcontinental country- Khilaphet and Secularism. The rise of AKP (Justice and Development Party) in Turkish Politics with the restrictions of religious practice during secular government and their gradual control over military tutelage- these have become centre of analysis to understand the regime of Turkey.

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In this context, Turkish foreign policy has been focused on ‘Zero problems with neighbours’. But Syrian refugee crisis ruptured Turkish foreign policy goal because Syrian refugee influx is connected with political, economic, social, cultural, ethnic and religious imperative of that region. Turkey has been a land of asylum for its distinct geographical feature since 1980s. Now Turkey is trying to cope with Syrian refugee problem. Syrian refugee crisis came into the course from April, 2011 when Turkey had perceived policy of ‘zero problems with neighbours’. By the end of 2011, relation between Turkey and Syria began to split when harsh measures against protests were amplified in Syria by Bashar al-Assad’s regime. From October 2011, Turkey declared ‘Open-door’ policy for the fleeing Syrian people, which is stated as ‘temporary protection regime’. Since March 2011, about four million refugees have fled from Syria to Turkey, Egypt, Lebanon, Jordan and other countries. Turkey became the leading countries to accept Syrian fleeing people. The ‘Open-door’ policy ensures ‘respect for the principles of non-refoulement’, which means the state cannot force the refugee or the asylum seeker to return back to the country in which they possess threat of persecution. Turkish government is committed to the best possible way of living and humanitarian assistance to the refugees from Syria. Most importantly, when this policy was applied, these refugees were considered as ‘guest’, not as refugees.<sup>1</sup>

By May 2014, 220000 refugees were housed in 22 camps. In 2018, there are 3.5 million registered Syrian refugees are there in Turkey with temporary protection<sup>2</sup>. There is a general assumption that Turkish government has taken enough effective measures for humanitarian assistance towards the refugee. Turkish Parliament passed ‘Law on Foreigners and International Protection’ and its article 91 states that “implementation of temporary protection shall be governed by a regulation to be issued by the Council of Ministers”.<sup>3</sup> But the terms and conditions of this protection policy were not précised in this article. This loophole has been analyzed within security perspective which illustrates Turkey’s interest behind controlling border.<sup>4</sup>

Many questions have been asked on the acceptance of refugees by the Turkish government. The issue has become more critical when the country itself was

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<sup>1</sup> Kemal Kirişçi, “Syrian refugees in turkey: the limits of an ‘Open-door’ policy”, Brookings Institution, 2013, Available at: <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/up-front/2013/06/27/syrian-refugees-in-turkey-the-limits-of-an-open-door-policy/>

<sup>2</sup> United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, “Global Focus- UNHCR Operation Worldwide”, Available at: <http://reporting.unhcr.org/node/2544?y=2018#year>

<sup>3</sup> Grand National Assembly of Turkey, “Law on Foreigners and International Protection”, 37,2013, Available at: [https://www.unhcr.org/tr/wp-content/uploads/sites/14/2017/02/law\\_on\\_foreigners\\_and\\_international\\_protection.pdf](https://www.unhcr.org/tr/wp-content/uploads/sites/14/2017/02/law_on_foreigners_and_international_protection.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> Burcu Tograil Koca, “Deconstructing Turkey’s “Open Door” Policy towards Refugees from Syria”, Migration Letters, Volume.12, No.3, 2013, Available at: [https://www.academia.edu/16158565/Deconstructing\\_Turkey\\_s\\_Open\\_Door\\_Policy\\_towards\\_Refugees\\_from\\_Syria](https://www.academia.edu/16158565/Deconstructing_Turkey_s_Open_Door_Policy_towards_Refugees_from_Syria)

facing unemployment and inflation problem. According to the National Employment Agency of Turkey (ISKUR), the rate of unemployment is 9.7%. The influx of Syrian refugees has made the problem more intensified as many regions are hiring Syrian refugee worker at cheap rate than Turkish workers.<sup>5</sup> Another claim has been claimed by the Shiite Muslim from Alwais and Alevi community of Turkey. Their leaders have been saying that Tayeep Erdogan is focused on altering the ethnic balance by accepting Sunni Muslims from Turkey.<sup>6</sup>

In this aspect, the question is- why Turkey adopted 'open-door' policy to the Syrian refugees? Was there any vested interested behind this 'Open-door' policy or it is the result of humanitarian far sight? The main objective of this paper is to scrutinize the reasons behind this 'open-door' policy. To answer the question of 'why' they have implemented this policy, qualitative methodology has been used. Reports of United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR), Key Informant Interview (KII) and content analysis from 2016 to 2019 have been conducted under primary data analysis. Moreover, Books and journal articles have been analyzed to review literature under secondary data analysis.

This article is divided into four parts. The next part will describe the analytical framework through which the decision of taking 'open-door' policy will be scrutinized. Then the third part will analyze Turkish political culture and the policy shifting of decision making. Finally, the policy behind accepting the refugees will be discussed through the analytical framework.

## **ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK**

'Open-door' policy is a distinct part of Turkish Foreign Policy which has been influenced by tremendous internal and external factors. Three major factors work jointly to determine the Foreign Policy of a country: External Environment, Decision-Making Level, Domestic Setting.

Within these three factors, there are some foreign policy models which represent a broad perspective. These five models include- Classical Democratic Theory, The Rational Actor Model, Bureaucratic Politics Model, The Power Elite Model, and The Pluralist Model. Each model is different in terms of concept and practice. Power Elite Model refers to the decision making process where regime interest become more important than public interest and a regime becomes dominant actor in decision making.

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<sup>5</sup> Ximena Carpio, Mathis Wagner, "The impact of Syrian Refugees in the Turkish Labor Market", World Bank Group, Social Protection and Labor Global Practice Group, 2015, Available at: <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/documents/download/54522>

<sup>6</sup> Roderick Parkes, "Turkey's Refugee Politics", European Institute for Security Studies, 2, 2015, Available at: [http://www.iss.europa.eu/uploads/media/Alert\\_44\\_Turkey\\_migration.pdf](http://www.iss.europa.eu/uploads/media/Alert_44_Turkey_migration.pdf)