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# ERDOĞAN'S POLITICAL LEADERSHIP AND FOREIGN POLICY NEXUS: THE CASE OF THE SYRIAN REFUGEE CRISIS AND TURKEY'S ROLE<sup>1</sup>

*Suleyman TEMIZ*

## **Abstract**

*Following the victory of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and the Justice and Development Party (AKP) in the 2002 Turkish general election, the country embarked on a highly successful program of economic liberalization and social conservatism. The stellar economic performance of the Turkish national economy transformed Turkey's position on the world stage, politically as well as economically, boosting the country's image in the world. Since the beginning of civil war in Syria following the 'Arab Spring' uprisings from 2011 onwards, the number of refugees in Turkey reached over 4 million as estimated by the UN in mid-August 2017, making Turkey the host country with the largest net refugee population in the world, to say nothing of the vast population of unregistered refugees. The Turkish receptive policies from the outset were predicated on the assumption that the conflict would come to a swift conclusion, allowing the Syrian "guests" (a word chosen in national political discourse rather than "refugees") to return home, precluding the need to plan for their long-term or permanent stay in Turkey. Unstable political conditions in the region and Turkey's generous open-door policy have made it a symbol of Islamic brotherhood and humanitarianism and it is the main hope of displaced Syrians and the region in general to ameliorate the humanitarian catastrophe and seek to end the conflict. This paper demonstrates the importance of Turkey's immigration policy under the leadership of Erdoğan, and its significant implications for foreign and domestic policy.*

**Keywords:** Erdoğan, Turkey, AKP, Syria, Refugees, Displaced persons, International aid.

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## Introduction

Political leadership is a fundamentally important aspect of domestic and international politics in modern democracies as well as in traditional autocracies, and it is essential to the progress of developing countries. Leadership essentially involves motivating others to take action towards a common goal.<sup>2</sup> Personally or socially, people have needs, which are met by successful leaders.<sup>3</sup> Leaders must solve social or organizational problems<sup>4</sup> related to the cognition of themselves and other stakeholders involved in a leadership context.<sup>5</sup>

Following victory in the 2002 Turkish general election, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan led the Justice and Development Party (AKP) to preside over a highly successful economic transformation policy that made Turkey a major player in the world economic forum, boosting the country's global image.<sup>6</sup> Following the beginning of the civil war in Syria from 2011 onwards, large numbers of displaced Syrian refugees began fleeing to Turkey and other neighboring countries, and by mid-August 2017 the UN estimated that Turkey had over 4 million refugees, the largest net number in the world, while the number of unregistered refugees fleeing across the border can only be guessed at.<sup>7</sup>

To understand Turkish attitudes and policy toward migration, it is essential to have an overview of the historical and demographic development of the country and its region following the disintegration of the Ottoman Caliphate and the establishment of the

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<sup>2</sup> Edwin A. Locke, *The Essence of Leadership: The Four Keys to Leading Successfully* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 1999), 3.

<sup>3</sup> Stephen J. Zaccaro, "Leadership Memes: From Ancient History and Literature to Twenty-first Century Theory and Research," in *The Oxford Handbook of Leadership and Organizations*, ed. David V. Day (Oxford: Oxford University Press, [2014]), 13-39.

<sup>4</sup> M. D. Mumford, et al., "Leadership Skills for a Changing World: Solving Complex Social Problems," *The Leadership Quarterly* 11, no. 1 (2000): 11-35.

<sup>5</sup> M. D. Mumford, L. L. Watts, and P. J. Partlow, "Leader Cognition: Approaches and Findings", *The Leadership Quarterly* (2015): 2.

<sup>6</sup> Yasin Karizma, *Zamanları Aktay* (İstanbul: Timaş Yayınları, 2011), 41-44.

<sup>7</sup> Ahmet İcduygu, *Syrian Refugees in Turkey: The Long Road Ahead* (Migration Policy Institute, 2015).

Republic of Turkey in 1923.<sup>8</sup> During the terminal phase of the Ottoman Empire in the late-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries the main internal opposition to the Ottoman Caliphate (particularly the pan-Islamic vision of Abdul Hamid II) was nationalism, which precipitated the Balkan Wars and Arab revolts during the 1900s, and open sabotage during WWI, contemporaneous with the rise of Turkish nationalism, which viewed the traditional multi-ethnic and multi-religious Islamic state model as a backward and inefficient relic preventing the Turks from advancing on the Western European race-based blueprint. Nevertheless, large numbers of non-Turkish Muslim refugees from the Balkans migrated to mainland Anatolia, who were incorporated into the new Kemalist vision as different varieties of Turks.

Consequently, while vigorously suppressing supra-ethnic Islamic identities (e.g. the universal Muslim call to prayer in Arabic, which was replaced by a Turkish version), the Republic presented itself as a Noah's Ark for *de facto* Muslim populations suffering from conflict and fleeing genocide in neighboring regions, for whom their Turkish motherland offered protection. Therefore, the Ottoman Empire and the Republic of Turkey, despite their very different worldviews, never refused Muslim migration and refugees. Thus the AKP refugee policy under Erdoğan's political leadership was ultimately inherited from the Ottoman state understanding.

Another legacy from the fall-out of the end of the Ottoman Empire is the historical problems with regional countries, such as Turkey's historical claims on Mosul in Iraq and its role as protector of Turkmen minorities there, and disputes with Syria over the emotionally charged city of Hatay important for Turkey during the Cold War and water issues. Furthermore, Syria's protection and support of Kurdish militant and paramilitary organizations, particularly the Kurdistan Worker's Party (PKK), is a major security issue for the Republic of Turkey, against whom the Kurdish issue is frequently used as leverage due to its own Kurdish separatist problem.<sup>9</sup> Relations between Turkey and Syria improved under the

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<sup>8</sup> Feroz Ahmad, *Turkey: The Request for Identity* (Oxford: Oxford Publication, 2003), 172.

<sup>9</sup> N. Gökalp Aras and Z. Şahin Mencütek, "The International Migration and Foreign

AKP, whose foreign policy was guided by the principle of ‘zero problems with neighbors’. As part of this, Turkey and Syria cooperated on important issues such as security, economics and culture between 2003 and 2011. This positive relationship was enabled by regional dynamics and the development of domestic politics in each country. However, this came to an end with the tide of popular discontent, protest and conflict that engulfed the Arab world during 2011, known as the ‘Arab Spring’, which in the case of Syria led to a protracted and on-going civil war conventionally known as the ‘Syrian Crisis’.

The Syrian Crisis caused over six million Syrians to flee to neighboring states (particularly Jordan and Turkey) and across the world. Necessary precautions for the massive refugee crisis were not taken and regional nations and international humanitarian aid organizations alike were totally unprepared for the disaster. The US and its NATO allies sought to effect a regime change in Syria but their time-honored tricks – following in the wake of their regime change by stealth in Libya failed to sway the UN (particularly Russia and China) and international public opinion. As Turkey and Jordan bore the brunt of this humanitarian emergency, some refugees began spilling over into Europe, where the German Chancellor offered humanitarian refuge but where most political elites pandered to native racist populism and sought to avoid receiving the ‘swarm’ of refugees. Faced with the European disingenuous and double-faced refugee policy, Turkey stepped forward to host over three million Syrian refugees over the course of six years, with some EU logistical assistance.

The EU is one of the major world economies, containing many of the most developed countries in the world, yet it reneged on its humanitarian responsibilities and dumped the great responsibility of refugee protection on Turkey, exposing the prevailing discourse on international development used over many decades to berate ‘developing’ countries and exclude Turkey itself from EU membership as a fraud. Turkey, under the policy of Erdoğan and the AKP, has continued to pursue a realistic and humanitarian program



to address the refugee crisis, and eventually this situation became a serious cornerstone in Turkey's foreign policy while Chancellor Merkel abandoned her earlier position and began pandering to right-wing populism against immigrants, attracting international acclaim.<sup>10</sup>

After the wave of Syrian refugees, Turkey started to donate humanitarian assistance, becoming the fourth most generous donor country in the world in 2012. According to the Global Humanitarian Assistance Report in 2013, Turkey is the most generous donor country.<sup>11</sup>

A major part of this assistance was distributed to refugees from Syria. According to the Global Humanitarian Assistance Report in 2015, Turkey continued to rise on the list of generous donor countries, in the context of increasing numbers of refugees, with Turkey donating \$3.2 billion towards refugees,<sup>12</sup> rising to \$6 billion Turkey gave the most humanitarian assistance as a percentage of gross national income at 0.75 percent, followed by UAE and Luxembourg at 0.18 and 0.15 percent respectively.<sup>13</sup> The report shows the international humanitarian assistance in total reached \$27.3 billion last year from \$25.7 billion in 2015. Turkey's humanitarian assistance makes up 22 percent of the total aid.

Under the leadership of Erdoğan, Turkey's relationship to the refugee crisis in Syria has various dimensions. This relationship is not only interconnected with state policy, but its respectful status as a benevolent country with a genuine interest in playing a positive role in international problems. The AKP has reshaped Turkey's global reputation in other areas like freedom and democracy as well as humanitarian assistance in numerous platforms, particularly in terms of becoming a serious donor country over the last five years. Erdoğan's personal involvement and leadership in the Syrian refugee

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<sup>10</sup> Senem Cevik and Efe Sevin, "A Quest for Soft Power: Turkey and the Syrian Refugee Crisis," *Journal of Communication Management* (2017): 4-42.

<sup>11</sup> *Global Humanitarian Assistance Report 2013* (Development Initiatives Ltd., Bristol, 2013).

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> *T.C. Disaster and Emergency Management Presidency Report 2017* (Ankara: Afet ve Acil Durum Yönetimi Başkanlığı, 2017).

crisis has been exceptional, particularly in contrast to the hostile attitudes of European leaders toward refugees.<sup>14</sup>

Erdoğan attributes this to the Turkish nation's feelings about crises, whereby its benevolent character encourages its commitment to humanitarian aid. In his opening speech to the World Humanitarian Summit, co-hosted by Turkey in Istanbul in 2016, he said "Turkey is a major actor in humanitarian aid by actively delivering aid to over 140 countries, with 6.4 billion dollars in aid and hosting over 3 million Syrian refugees... Our humanitarian aid has reached \$6.4 billion in 2014". Similarly, at the NATO 62<sup>nd</sup> Assembly Meeting, President Erdoğan highlighted Turkey's assistance to Syrian refugees: "We have been on the forefront of the Syrian crisis trying to find a solution. Similarly, we have self-sacrificed and hosted over 3 million refugees fleeing from the civil war."

At every opportunity, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan also explained Turkey's open door policy. From the beginning of the Syrian Crisis, Turkey has ensured an open-door policy and shown its welcoming side. President Erdoğan in the World Humanitarian Summit Meeting highlighted Turkey's policy: "I would like to proudly say that as long as the refugee crisis continues, no matter if they're Syrian, Iraqi or other, we will never close our door to humans and humanity." Foreign Minister Çavuşoğlu at the Meeting of Council of Foreign Ministers of the 13<sup>th</sup> Islamic Summit of the OIC said that:

"Migration crisis is one of the catastrophes triggered by the situation in Syria. As Turkey we have considered as our human duty to extend a helping hand to the innocent people in Syria. We will continue to protect our brothers in these hard times. We are trying to prevent these desperate people on their journey of hope to suffer in the hands of the migrant smugglers."

When we look at the official speeches of Erdoğan and Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu, they defined Turkey as a benevolent state in contrast to the inefficient support of the international community, particularly their deficiency of economic support,

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<sup>14</sup> Senem Cevik, and Efe Sevin, "A Quest for Soft Power . . .

leaving Turkey to shoulder the burden alone. Erdoğan's humanitarian stance has been acclaimed worldwide, despite concerted attempts to smear and destroy him and the AKP in Turkey and parts of the world media. Erdoğan observed that the universal help system was not working well and he blamed other countries for not honest and closing their eyes to the cruelty being perpetrated. Erdoğan's political perspective has highlighted that within the global help system the main problem is not putting *people* first, and the unequal distribution of humanitarian relief work. In his opening speech to the World Humanitarian Summit, Erdoğan said:

“The present aid system is inadequate in responding to emergency humanitarian relief. The weight of this system which does not provide solutions rests on a few countries. It is time everyone shoulders equal weight. First of all, we need to restructure the global aid system by putting people in the center.”

In the same way, in the closing speech Erdoğan demanded that “We need to share the political, ethical and financial responsibilities,” while in his UN General Assembly he cautioned the EU that “it is futile to look for peace behind barbed wires and high walls.” In the NATO Parliamentary Assembly meeting, Erdoğan said: “Turkey has learned how to live with these crises day to day. Hosting this conference in Turkey should be demonstrative that we are not indifferent to crises that occupy the global scene”. Erdoğan's consistent critique of the global humanitarian aid system is suggestive of Turkey's honest and genuine humanitarian position.

Turkey has offered a new humanitarian aid model for the world in sharp distinction to the traditional European paradigm, with the lackluster or overtly hostile approaches of European leaders exposing a deep lack of concern for humanitarian issues. At the UNHCR Summit held for the Syrian refugee crises, Erdoğan noted that the EU contributed only \$512 million to the Turkish relief efforts, which amount to over \$12 billion, contrary to the agreement between the EU and Turkey made in March 2016. Erdoğan's opening criticism of the EU become famous all over the world, particularly among developing countries. Erdoğan made a stunning speech in

New York during the 71<sup>st</sup> session of UN General Assembly, saying five permanent member countries of the UN do not have the right to seal the fate of the rest of the world:<sup>15</sup>

“This system is subjugating the rest of the world to the decision of five countries. This is not fair. We have been repeatedly offering UN to turn all the members to permanent members. In this way the members may rotate in decision making in every two years so that each of them will have the right to take this important decision concerning all the world... It is possible to turn the UN into being more democratic, fair, transparent, efficient... It is obvious that unless the Security Council, which is the main organ responsible for establishment of international peace and security, is reformed, these efforts will not reach their purpose completely. For his reason, I remind the reality that ‘the World is bigger than 5’ to the international public opinion on every occasion.”<sup>16</sup>

He further noted that over six years of the Syrian Crisis, 600,000 people had been killed, 12 million were displaced and 5 million were international refugees, including approximately 3 million in Turkey. Noting the open approach of Turkey he said:

“We do not ask ‘Why did you come to Turkey?’ We have not closed our doors. We have done our humanitarian and conscientious duty to these people who fled barrel bombs and air strikes. We will continue to do so. The world may not let them in. The West may not let them in, but we will. Why? Because, we are human beings. Therefore, we have to open our doors to

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<sup>15</sup> “If Syria is to be Divided, So Will Turkey, says Karagul,” *Yeni Safak*, September 6, 2018, <https://www.yenisafak.com/en/world/turkey-could-declare-war-against-assad-if-tehran-summit-fails-says-karagul-3440408>.

<sup>16</sup> Tayyip Erdogan, “Speeches and Statements,” *Presidency of the Republic of Turkey*, accessed September 2, 2017, <https://www.tccb.gov.tr/en/news/542/52361/president-Erdoğan-addresses-the-un-general-assembly.html>

human beings in the face of such a catastrophe. We have opened our doors and we will. I observe that international community has been simply listening these numbers indifferently and unresponsively for a long time. However, each number pronounced corresponds to a human being...<sup>17</sup>

“The Syrian people are exhausted in the grip of proxy wars which have been shaped by a cruel administration, unmerciful terrorist organizations, global and regional competition. In this process, unfortunately, the international community has failed in living up to humanitarian values and conscience. We have spent \$12.5 billion so far. Our NGO's and municipalities have spent as much as that, which means we have spent nearly \$25 billion in total. How much have we received from the world? The support the UN, under whose roof we are right now, has provided us so far is \$525 million. That is it. Has anything come from the European Union? Unfortunately, the EU has not been able to keep its promises. They have sent \$178 million to the UNICEF. That is all. However, they have not sent any help to Turkey for this issue. We have taken care to act in close contact and cooperation with regional and global actors with the belief that this matter is a common issue of all humanity. We could not, did not and will not stay in silence in the face of this doomsday which our neighbor and relative Syrian people have been living through. Regardless of ethnic, sectarian or religious differences, we have embraced 3 million Syrians taken refuge in Turkey. We will continue our support to these people we host in container and tent cities in Turkey. The European Union and the countries that promised to contribute in this regard have not kept their promises. We expect

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

them to keep their promises. We also expect the promises given by the UN to be kept.”<sup>18</sup>

“From this rostrum, I address to all international community and all European friends who perceive Syrian refugees as a vital threat for themselves... It is a futile effort to look for peace behind the barbed wire fences and high walls. If we cannot find a solution for the education, employment and housing problems of Syrian refugees quickly, we cannot prevent the irregular migration, social issues and security risks. We cannot lose any more time for terminating the conflict, terrorism and persecution environment which is the source of problem in Syria and for implementing the political settlement process.”

“Turkey is a country that gives utmost importance to the protection of the Syria’s territorial integrity and political unity... Turkey by no means has any interest in Syrian territory. Syria belongs to Syrian people. Nobody must have any other plans for it. Starting with our support for the Syrian opposition, Operation Euphrates Shield has a critical importance for the re-establishment of the stability, peace and balance in a region in the grips of despair.”<sup>19</sup>

Turkey ranks alongside the US and the UK in terms of providing support to the least developed countries, and ranks first relative to GNP. Erdoğan said:

“Hosting the greatest number of refugees across the world, Turkey exerts every effort to prevent irregular migration, as well... Upon the initiative of Turkey, the subject of Syrian refugees was handled in the UN General Assembly session last year for the first time. Similarly, the subjects of migration and terrorism were included in the G-20 agenda upon the initiatives of

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

Turkey. We act in cooperation with the European Union against refugee crisis. With a view to preventing deaths in the Aegean Sea, we succeeded in reducing the number of irregular migration to 50 recently, which was 7000 per day in October 2015. This table indicates that Turkey has successfully fulfilled its commitments within the framework of its agreement with the European Union. Nevertheless, we regret that the promises made by the European Union with the agreement dated 18 March 2016 has been nearly forgotten, and artificial excuses are raised all the time.”<sup>20</sup>

### **“The World is Bigger Than 5”**

Criticizing the permanent-member system of the UN Security Council, President Erdoğan underscored:

“We should reach the broadest compromise possible on a comprehensive reform that will make the Security Council a more democratic, fair, transparent and effective structure whose representative feature is strengthened... We appreciate the steps taken under the leadership of Secretary General Ban Ki Moon with regard to the UN reform and making especially peace keeping and peace making activities more effective... In addition, it is obvious that unless the Security Council, which is the main organ responsible for establishment of international peace and security, is reformed, these efforts will not reach their purpose completely. For his reason, I remind the reality that ‘the World is bigger than 5’ to the international public opinion on every occasion.”<sup>21</sup>

“The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development that we created together includes assertive and transformative goals for all of us... Turkey’s Official Development

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

Assistance has reached \$3.9 billion in 2015. This ratio corresponding to 0.54% of our Gross National Product is beyond the OECD average and approach us remarkably to the UN target which is 0.7%. As Turkey, we surpassed our commitment for providing a support of \$200 million annually to the Least Developed Countries in 2011 and provided more than \$1.5 billion in 5 years.”

Erdoğan continued his sharp leadership on this issue and openly accused the international community of a duplicitous and selfish policy. In the World Humanitarian Summit Erdoğan said that “the international community is shying away from contributing to the relief of the humanitarian crisis and that despite the lack of engagement by the international community and a contribution of \$455 million, Turkey’s efforts in aiding the refugees has reached \$10 billion.” At the NATO 62<sup>nd</sup> Parliamentary Assembly meeting in Istanbul, Erdoğan addressed the international community, highlighting the righteousness of Turkey and Europe’s anti-refugee stance:

“Unfortunately, the promises that were given to us have been empty promises and the assistance has been very minimal... once there was an influx of refugees to Europe, European countries panicked. One country said they can take in 100 refugees, another said 200, another one said 500. No one had an open-door policy like Turkey and said ‘I will take in as many refugees as possible’. It is very sad that we were left alone in sharing the burden of humanitarian crises and it is such a bad example for the future.”

Erdoğan has vociferously berated the international community, implicitly the Western countries and overtly the EU, for breaking its word and not honoring fundamental humanitarian commitments, while seeking to presents itself as the arbiter of universal justice. According to Erdoğan’s rhetoric, the “West” is dishonest and disingenuous, and he has partially attributed this to religious heritage, accusing the Christian west of being silent in the face of cruelty because of the Muslim identification of the majority of Syrian



refugees. He extended this critique to Turkish academics and politicians who sought political authority for themselves while ignoring the Syrian tragedy.

## **Conclusion**

Since the outset of the conflict in March 2011, increasing numbers of refugees from Syria have sought asylum in Turkey. The escalation of violations in Syria in 2012 and onwards created dramatic increases in humanitarian needs. From the outset of the conflict, The Republic of Turkey, with its historical, cultural and neighborhood ties, followed an open door policy to refugees who has entered Turkey through borders. In this case Turkey started to assume a much more important role in the Middle Eastern region than at any time since the Ottoman era. Turkey became the most generous country in providing all type of humanitarian aid to Syrian citizens affected by this tragedy, whether under temporary protection in Turkey or within the Syrian borders. It also extended its military protection to border towns and villages to protect civilians.

During this critical period, Erdoğan has acted self-confidently and proudly announced his country's open door policy, in stark contradiction to the leadership of European countries. In the face of the protracted crisis in Syria, Turkey has passed a great test of humanity and taken care of over 3 million refugees without any discrimination. Many developed countries, claiming to be the champions of fundamental rights and humanitarian values, have unfortunately failed in duly responding to this humanitarian tragedy and turned their back on the oppressed at their gates. In all of the official speeches of Erdoğan quoted above, delivered in the international arena, he interpreted the cause of the problem as Europe's dilemma about professing to espouse universal humanitarian values while entrenching anti-refugee policies betraying an unwillingness to acknowledge shared humanity with others. Conversely, under the leadership of Erdoğan and the AKP, Turkey has delivered an exemplary humanitarian response and a comprehensive solution that the world is encouraged to follow, indicating that the West's posturing about enlightened world leadership no longer fools the people of the world.

Alongside this humanitarian approach, the Republic of Turkey has a comprehensive position affirming the protection of Syria's regional unity in any grand political solution. Syria should be cleared of all elements of terrorism and its tools, while all foreign armies and combatants should leave Syrian territories.<sup>22</sup> A transitional government should be formed that includes all stakeholders in Syria in an atmosphere conducive to moving towards free and fair elections and the drafting of a new constitution to reflect the will and hopes of all Syrian citizens for democracy, freedom, rule of law and equality for all.

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<sup>22</sup> Ibrahim Kalin, "Syria: What is next?", *Daily Sabah*, accessed August 13, 2017, <https://www.dailysabah.com/columns/ibrahim-kalin/2017/11/18/syria-what-is-next>.



# AL-SHAJARA

Special Issue

Contents

RETHINKING UNHCR AND OIC RESPONSE TO FORCED MIGRATION <i>Fethi B Jomaa Ahmed</i>	1
RAWA MIGRATION TO THE MALAY PENINSULA IN THE 19 <sup>TH</sup> CENTURY: THE CASE OF PAHANG, PERAK, AND SELANGOR <i>Fauziah Fathil, Wan Suhana Wan Sulong &amp; Nor Faridah Abdul Manaf</i>	27
A USES AND GRATIFICATIONS PERSPECTIVE ON MEDIA USE BY REFUGEES FROM MYANMAR AND PAKISTAN IN MALAYSIA <i>Aida Mokhtar &amp; Nurul Miza Mohd Rashid</i>	51
A SCATTERED LIFE: THE LIVED EXPERIENCES OF ROHINGYA REFUGEE MOTHERS IN MALAYSIA <i>Munira Arshad &amp; Arshad Islam</i>	107
ERDOĞAN'S POLITICAL LEADERSHIP AND FOREIGN POLICY NEXUS: THE CASE OF THE SYRIAN REFUGEE CRISIS AND TURKEY'S ROLE <i>Suleyman TEMIZ</i>	123
FROM IMMIGRANTS TO SPORTS FIGURES: THE CASE STUDY OF THE IOC REFUGEE TEAM IN RIO OLYMPICS 2016 <i>Baidruel Hairiel Abd Rahim, Nurazzura Mohamad DiaH &amp; Mohd Salleh Aman</i>	137
CHINESE MIGRANTS AND INDIGENOUS PEOPLE OF SABAH: LOCAL DEVELOPMENT THROUGH CULTURAL COOPERATION <i>Rosdianah Yacho</i>	155
MUSLIM MIGRATION TO THE WEST: THE CASE OF THE MUSLIM MINORITY IN INDIA <i>Zulqernain Haider Subhani, Nor Azlin Tajuddin &amp; Nurazzura Mohamad Diah</i>	173
THE CRISIS ON THE BORDER OF TURKEY: AN ANALYSIS OF SYRIAN REFUGEES' EDUCATION, SHELTER AND HEALTHCARE <i>Ahmed Cagri INAN</i>	195
GENOCIDE OF ROHINGYA MUSLIMS: A CLASSICAL MODEL OF ETHNIC CLEANSING <i>Noor Mohammad Osmani, Belayet Hossen, Qutub Shah &amp; Maulana Akbar Shah @U Tun Aung</i>	215
NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS	237

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9 771394 687009