Ontological Security, Identity, and Movement of the People: Barack Obama’s Syrian Refugee Policy

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Abstract
This article examines the United States’ decision to admit 10,000 Syrian refugees in the fiscal year of 2016 amidst potential national security concerns brought by the incoming refugees. In past studies, United States’ policies of refugee admission mainly focused on the security and political interests, while this particular admission decision reflected a different interest consideration, namely the ideational aspect of the United States as a nation of immigrants. Through discourse analysis on the speeches and remarks made by government actors of the United States, this research offers an alternative perspective on understanding how the United States came to a decision that may not reflect traditional security interests, but reflects its ontological security needs or its security of being. Using the framework of analysis offered by Brent J. Steele, this research finds that the United States’ awareness of its capabilities, along with past memory as a nation of immigrants and urgings from fellow international actors, affects the United States in reaching the decision to admit Syrian refugees.

Keywords: ontological security, Syrian conflict, Obama’s refugee policy, identity, people movement, nation of immigrants
INTRODUCTION

“The Exodus: Movement of Jah people!”
--Bob Marley & The Wailers

The United States is a country known to be proud of its history as a nation built and raised by immigrants and refugees. In fact, President John F. Kennedy (1958) popularized this particular identity through the term nation of immigrants. Since the North American continent began to be inhabited by European settlers in the 16th century, immigration has profoundly dominated the lives of its people (Martin 2011:1). After World War II, the United States (U.S.) became the Western country with the largest number of refugee acceptance. From 1946 to 1994, there were at least three million refugees and other asylum seekers who were granted permanent residence in the United States (Gibney 2004:132). During the Cold War, the U.S. imposed a “program resettlement“ policy, which painted a global image that this country would always accept and bring refugees into their country (Martin 2011:221).

The tradition and image of the U.S. of being open to immigrants and refugees have continued even after the end of Cold War era. However, these have faced major challenges due to President Bush’s global war on terrorism following the 9/11 terrorist attacks. The challenge arose from concerns that the openness to migrants and refugees would actually be a welcoming sign for terrorists to enter American soil. Among various violent conflicts occurring in this era, the Syrian conflict is one of the most observed conflicts by the international community. Its spillover effects precipitated various further international challenges, one of which is the sheer number of refugees. Amidst the complicated case of Syrian refugees, the international community has been asking the U.S. to play a greater role and accept Syrian refugees (Theiler 2015). The U.S., initially reluctant to accept Syrian refugees, eventually started to open its doors for refugees. President Barack Obama said in early 2016 that he would accept 10,000 Syrian refugees. Even amid fears of terrorist infiltration, President Obama insisted on accepting Syrian refugees (Dinan 2016).

Previous studies that discussed U.S. policy in accepting migrants and, especially, refugees, generally analyzed the state’s political security interests, both by considering exogenous and endogenous factors. A study discussing exogenous factors concluded that U.S. policy of accepting
refugees was due to pragmatic considerations (Snyder 2011:29) or as a deterrence move (Hassan 2000:184-185). This pragmatic consideration arose from the realist paradigm highlighting that the strategies and approaches used in a state of humanitarian crisis are determined by the interests of political actors and are in accordance with the adopted ethics. If pragmatic considerations aim to politically leverage state actors vis-à-vis the international community, deterrence policies have a different objective. Political actors take deterrence policies related to the problem of refugees because they intend to reduce the number of asylum seekers, reduce (or avoid) unnecessary state expenses, and also demonstrate that the political actors can deal with refugee problems. As an exogenous factor, deterrence policies facilitate endogenous factors in the policy of the U.S. accepting refugees. Holmes and Keith (2010) and Rottman et al (2009) explained how the policies and behavior of judges influence U.S. policy to accept refugees. One abstraction that can be formulated by taking into account both endogenous and exogenous factors is material security interests—both state security and societal security (individual citizens) from terrorism threats—always overshadowing U.S. policy in accepting refugees. In other words, previous studies on this topic still ignored non-material security factors in U.S. policy in accepting refugees. The decision of President Obama of accepting Syrian refugees derived from ideational considerations factors in order to protect the identity of the U.S. as a nation of immigrants can and should be captured with ontological security framework. Departing from this point of view, this article would like to bring question on “how ontological security plays a role in the United States’ policy of accepting Syrian refugees.”

RESEARCH METHOD

This article uses the qualitative research method with a deductive approach. The qualitative research method emphasizes the description of the context to delineate the significance of the subject of the research and provide explanation of an event (Bryman 2004:366-367). With this understanding, the qualitative research method in this article would explain the context of the social construction of U.S. identity, which is used as the basis of President Obama administration’s policy of accepting Syrian refugees. Meanwhile, the deductive approach means that analysis in this article is guided by a theoretical framework, namely variables and
indicators as observation units identified from the ontological security theory.

This article also uses primary data and secondary data. The primary data used are public statements or speeches by President Barack Obama, high-ranking officials in the administration, and influential figures in the U.S. decision to accept Syrian refugees. The secondary data used in this research are the supporting information needed to explain the social construction of American identity such as narratives about the immigrant nation, traditions of migration and accepting refugees, global forces, and other related narratives. Primary data is exclusively collected online, while secondary data is collected from tracing previous academic studies related to the topic and other valid documents. The timeframe for the data used began from 2011—during the outbreak of violent conflict in Syria—until 2016 when President Obama stated that he would receive 10,000 Syrian refugees for fiscal year 2016/2017. To ensure data accuracy, the authors conducted a triangulation process to check the validity and reliability of data through comparison of data sources obtained from books, journals, online and articles that were in accordance with the research questions.

IDENTITY AND ONTOLOGICAL SECURITY

Identity is needed in international relations to determine predictability and order. Without identity, the world will turn chaotic, uncertain and in disarray. Hopf (1998) considers the absence (or lack) of identity to be worse than the condition of world anarchy, whereas Wendt (1999:224) argues that identity in general is what makes something itself. Identity is basically a conception of self-quality that is understood by actors. There are two types of identities, namely identities that are understood by oneself (self) and which are perceived by others (other). This constitutes identity to be something created by internal and external structures. Therefore, identity might intersect or even overlap with state identity (Alexandrov 2003:36). National identity is related to the shared narrative that binds an ‘imagined community,’ similar to Anderson’s (1983) idea of the origin of the nation.

A derived concept of identity used as analytical framework in this article is ontological security. Giddens (1991) first invented this concept to refer to the security of self-existence and trust in others to avoid existential anxiety. Self-identity is a reflexive project that we create and
maintain. This identity is our understanding of ourselves and biography we narrate. In short, for Giddens (1991:243), ontological security is a sense of continuity and regularity of events. Meanwhile, Huysmans (1998:342) observes that ontological security is a strategy setting the limits of reflexivity to establish social relations based on symbolic and institutional order. As such, a state’s legitimacy is seen from its ability to create order: a state’s ability to affirm an order for intelligible survival, rather than the form of creator order itself. Thus, ontological security explains the necessity of consistency and stability. Stability does not necessarily mean a permanent and unchanging state of mind. Rather, it is the sense of continuity in the actor to affirm their self-agency (Mitzen 2006:342).

Furthermore, Steele (2008:3) states that the state actor takes social actions to fulfill its identity needs, even if these actions are not always sustainable with their physical existence. Ontological security elucidates a state’s social actions and motives in its actions thereby, namely: morality, humanity, and honor. Although physical security is important for a state actor, ontological security can be deemed more important because these factors reinforce and strongly relate to state identity. As such, state actions based on ontological security would not only ensure the physical existence of the state but also how the state reflects itself, and how it is perceived by other actors. Ontological security process is described by Steele using hermeneutic approach, specifically interpretive approach. The ontological security process, according to Steele, is the process of constituting meaning for action through the existence of biographical narratives, how actors take appropriate actions to promote the best possible reflection of themselves to other actors, and how internal dynamics can influence national self-position in the international arena (2008:5-6).

Steele (2008) identifies four components of ontological security. The first component is material and reflexive capabilities. It refers to the role and identity of a state that affects its material capabilities. Material capability depends on reflexive capabilities that indicates a state’s awareness of its ability to act when other actors cannot. This awareness drives a state to become vulnerable to different emotional processes, such as shame. Through the ontological security perspective, a powerful country that ignores humanitarian crises would find its self-identity in disarray as a result of opposition to its biographical narratives. Thus, material capabilities depend on reflexive capabilities, by which a state is
aware of its ability to create more significant outcomes than countries that have lackluster capability (Steele 2008:69-70).

The second component is crisis assessment, which depends on three abilities: (1) discursive ability; (2) plausibly linking that crisis to the national self, and (3) identifying which policy might effectively terminate the crisis. There are sub-factors that affect the ability of the state to consider crises, such as information from external agents from media or non-governmental organizations (NGOs), as well as internal military intelligence. Military doctrine can influence whether actions taken are expressed in response to identity attacks or physical threats (Steele 2008:71).

The third component, namely biographical narrative (illocutionary discourse), is a form of performative language and is a commitment to self-identity. The biographical narrative constructs reality seen by actors, so that state agents can associate their identities with actions taken and position themselves in the international community. It also constitutes meaning for events and creates continuity of connectivity for serial events (Steele 2008:73). Eventually, this continuity creates ontological security. Steele (2008:71) identifies four processes in biographical narratives, namely the understanding of the actor of (1) the causes of events; (2) what the event means to the actor’s identity; (3) how events become important for actor’s interest; and (4) what policies should be taken to achieve these interests.

The last component is co-actor discourse strategies (perlocutionary discourse). This component is related to ontological security, which is disrupted due to the language construction of members of the international community that allude to state failures in the past. Actors can frame an event so that it can influence other parties to change their policies according to their sense of ontological security. The discourse shapes the situation and actors can carry out strategic framing that

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1There are three forms of speech act, namely locutionary, illocutionary, and perlocutionary. Locutionary is a statement of what it is; illocutionary means there are actions that occur through the pronunciation of a statement; and perlocutionary means the speaker produces an impact on the listener. In short: to say something, to act in saying something, to bring about something through acting in saying something (Austin in Habermas 1984:288-289).

2There are two characteristics of speech or language, namely performative and constative. Performative indicates that saying something means making the speech a reality. For example, pastors who marry a couple into husband and wife use performative language skills. Constative, on the contrary, only states something or condition that exists (Austin 1962:3-6).
threatens the state’s identity until the state actor is triggered to act (Steele 2008:74).³

The four components above show that ontological security underlines being as the starting point for ontological understanding of security. The focus on the concept of being makes the ontological security approach differ from the traditional understanding of security that emphasizes survival as a starting point for ontological understanding of security. In other words, these two approaches differ in observing the consequences of insecurity. Traditional security bases its argument on changes in material conditions and its resulting damage, while ontological security pays more attention on the difference in biographical narratives and actual behavior (Steele 2008:3).⁴

U.S. MATERIAL AND REFLEXIVE CAPABILITIES

Material and reflexive capabilities can be seen through the prism of state’s power. The greater a state’s material capability, the greater its ability to act in the midst of the inability of other actors. Countries that are considered powerful, with all their material capabilities, are constrained by their ability to determine international politics. A humanitarian crisis, which is considered to be prevented or handled well by powerful countries, actually hurts the sense of self-identity created by state’s biographical narrative. The material capability depends on the actor’s reflexive capability; the actor’s awareness of its capability to influence or create results that actors cannot achieve with less power (Steel 2008:70). In the context of acceptance of Syrian refugees in the U.S., power capability can be seen from the state leader’s perception on U.S. capability as a strong country compared to other countries; this view is reflected in President Obama’s speech at West Point, U.S.

In the speech, President Obama mentioned that the U.S. was a superior country as a global leader, with their global leadership perceived

³This component is explained in more depth by Steele (2007:901) in his writing on reflexive discourse. Reflexive discourse occurs when international actors create a sense of insecurity in powerful countries and influence the country to take actions that were initially reluctant to do. Insecurity is created by “attacking” the conflict between state action and its biographical narrative.

⁴This difference again emphasizes that “the term or concept of security is [...] ‘essentially the contested concept’ therefore is subjective in nature [...] there would be no universal consensus regarding the definition of security” (Kurniawan 2018:13-14)
not only from military capabilities, but also from its economy. The U.S. economy is considered dynamic, with innovative business dynamics. There is no large military threat in the scale faced by U.S. during the Cold War. President Obama also depicted U.S. perceptions on its role in international politics (*The White House* 28 May 2014), by indicating U.S. role during a series of disasters in Southeast Asia, schoolchildren kidnapping in Africa, or hostage situations in Eastern Europe (*The White House* 28 May 2014). Referring to these cases, President Obama stated that U.S. was the main reference when other actors seek help. This role as a “helper” or “savior” makes U.S. a nation that the world needs, both in the past, present, and future.

Furthermore, President Obama believed the U.S. had military capabilities that support U.S. global leadership. However, military capacity is not the main factor that determines leadership. The U.S. recognizes its ability as a strong and leading country, but not all problems in the world can be immediately resolved through military action (*The White House* 28 May 2014). This can also be seen from President Obama’s speech in Antalya, Turkey, about a year later. In the speech, President Obama stressed that while the U.S. is a country with prominent, even the best, military capabilities, military operations are not always the main solution nor it is the U.S.’ strategy in solving global security problems. The speech implies two things. First, the U.S. realizes that tyrannical governments could not be overthrown solely through military operations (Fukuyama 2007:133). Second, at the same time, the U.S. recognizes itself as an indispensable nation. If the U.S. mobilized its military force in the face of conflict in Syria, the decision was set in response to a poison gas attack that killed more than a thousand civilians. The decision was based on the U.S.’ awareness as a global leader (*The White House* 10 September 2013).

The acceptance of Syrian refugees by the U.S. is better understood when not only material aspects are taken into consideration, but also ideational aspects. The ideational aspect can be seen from Obama’s speech in Antalya, Turkey, November 16, 2015 (*The White House* 16 November 2015). In the speech, President Obama indicated that the U.S. was the biggest contributor to the humanitarian aid fund for the Syrian people. The U.S. has great capabilities, both militarily and economically in global level. Its ability to mobilize military power, both in quality and quantity, is an identity that becomes U.S.’ source of pride.
However, in the face of the Syrian conflict, the U.S. tends to choose not to immediately deploy military forces.

This reluctance is based on two reasons implicated in President Obama’s speeches. First, the United States is reluctant to face the possibility of similar mistakes in the past. During the invasion of Iraq, the United States wanted to overthrow Saddam Hussein’s tyrannical government in order to bring prosperity for the people in the Middle East. However, this effort was not fully achieved because the U.S. was more focused on overthrowing the tyrannical government, not on the community building that accommodated and facilitated government inclusiveness. Second, U.S. reluctance arises from its perception of the country’s capabilities. The U.S. does not doubt its capabilities, but its superior capabilities make it impossible for the U.S. to simply deploy military forces in every conflict in the world, especially in Syria. Given the perception of being a global leader, the U.S. needs to prepare for the possibility of the need to mobilize military forces not only in one conflict or terrorist attack, but other security challenges in other areas. The U.S. cannot sacrifice its military power and roam as they wish in the Syrian conflict, because it also requires taking into consideration the outbreak of other conflicts requiring its assistance.

In the various speeches described above, there is awareness and perception of the U.S.’ ability and role in international politics. The U.S. recognizes and sees itself as a global leader and indispensable nation. Viewed from the traditional security aspect, the U.S. sees itself as a country with high military capabilities, which is not only measured by its military strength, but also on the country’s dynamic economy with an innovative business sector. This adequate material capability spurs the U.S. to be a country that is second to none in the world.

The perception of U.S. role in the international politics can be understood from how Obama stated that the U.S. has global leadership. This global leadership is not only seen from material capabilities, but also the role of the U.S. in the international social and political dynamics. The U.S. perceives itself as a nation that cannot be ignored (indispensable nation), a nation needed and irreplaceable by other nations. The perception of the world’s need for the presence and role of the United States can also be understood from several incidents referred to by President Obama, namely natural disasters in the Philippines, terrorism in Nigeria, and hostage taking of government buildings in Ukraine. These three problems occurred in other parts of the world.
and did not directly involve the U.S. However, the U.S. sees that the world expects the U.S. to intervene to get things done. This perception shows U.S.’ awareness of its capabilities and the role that it can play in handling conflicts and crises in the world.

The role that should be exercised by the U.S. is naturally showing and affirming America’s leadership and capabilities. The U.S recognizes that deploying military forces is not always the answer to all problems. The U.S. reflected on the past, namely the invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan. The invasions were described as efforts to spread democratic values; they did not work well due to the lack of further efforts to build and perpetuate democracy. Furthermore, the invasions were costly and resulted in a high number of casualties, including a significant number of U.S. soldiers. This experience supports the idea of the Obama administration that military power, as strong and as low as anything, cannot always solve the problem.

However, the lack of role of the U.S. in dealing with the Syrian refugee crisis has become an anomaly amid the statement of America as an indispensable leader. As a global leader, the U.S. is the biggest contributor to humanitarian funding for the Syrian crisis. However, leadership does not only refer to leadership based on material capability. Material capability might help to certain extent, but the Syrian refugee crisis cannot be immediately overcome by humanitarian funding or a reduction in military forces. The leadership of the U.S. as an indispensable nation is expected to materialize and be claimed by the U.S. in the midst of a crisis of Syrian refugees. The U.S. needs to pay attention not only to the resolution of the Syrian conflict, but also to people who have been displaced and forced to flee Syria. More attention and action for the handling of refugees is the demand and part of the discourse of acceptance of Syrian refugees, especially from international community.

**ASSESSMENT ON SYRIAN REFUGEES CRISIS**

This crisis assessment discusses how the US government has discursively constructed the problem of Syrian refugees as a crisis. The information used to construct a condition into a crisis can originate from agents outside of state actors, for example media or non-governmental organizations (NGOs). In addition, the state can also use military intelligence to assess costs and seek information that shape
social reality (Steel 2008:71). This construction of crisis is reflected in Obama’s speech on September 20, 2016. In his speech, Obama indicated that the U.S. constructed a crisis of Syrian refugees by comparing it with past experience in World War II. Mentioning World War II as a reference is the construction of the significance of the Syrian refugee crisis for the U.S. The use of words such as ‘epic’ and ‘urgent’ shows the significance of the Syrian refugee crisis for the U.S. The Syrian refugee crisis becomes the biggest refugee crisis in the world after World War II and the U.S. saw the necessity for collective action from international community in dealing with the crisis (The White House 20 September 2016).

Obama’s August 31, 2013 speech reaffirmed the perception of the U.S. regarding the ‘epic’ and ‘urgent’ nature of the conflict in Syria. Although not specifically discussing the crisis of Syrian refugees, the discussion in the speech provided an overview of the views of the U.S. on the Syrian conflict. In his speech, President Obama said that the U.S. had found that the Syrian government was responsible for the attacks and atrocities that had occurred to its people. The US intelligence agency also discovered that the Assad regime was ready to use chemical weapons. The attack launched on the Syrian people was mentioned as the reason why the American people should care about the conflict occurring in Syria (The White House 31 August 2013).

Obama’s speech indicated that the U.S.’ concern about Syrian conflict could not be separated from the humanitarian tragedy in the form of high numbers of refugees. In his speech on November 16, 2015 in Antalya, Turkey, President Obama warned that the refugees were victims of terrorism. The refugees are those who refuse and run away to avoid the atrocities of terrorism. Thus, refusing and expelling refugees from entering the U.S. is morally wrong (The White House 16 November 2015). This speech was in line with President Obama’s speech on September 20, 2016, which linked the crisis to the national conception—the fact that the founders of the United States were immigrants and refugees. The Americans have boasted and upheld this identity of themselves from generation to generation. Thus, rejecting entry of Syrian refugees is a betrayal of these fundamental values. Obama likened the rejection of refugees in the present to be similar to what happened in the past, specifically in the Nazi era of Germany (The White House 20 September 2016).
The crisis was constructed with the findings of US intelligence in the form of a toxic gas attack on the Syrian people by their own government. Terrorism is considered the biggest cause of the massive movement of the Syrian people, which later became a refugee crisis. American values are considered to be needed in handling this crisis by welcoming refugees. When associated with ontological security theory, the U.S. constructs crises discursively through linking them to the conditions of World War II. The relationship between the crisis and the self-concept of the U.S. can be seen from the discourse that links the importance of accepting refugees to the U.S. as part of American tradition. Refugee acceptance, then, is considered as one of the policies seen to overcome the Syrian refugee crisis.

BIOGRAPHICAL NARRATIVE OF THE AMERICAN NATION

The third component in ontological security is the biographical narrative, which consists of four processes: (1) the actor’s understanding of the cause of the event; (2) the meaning of the event to the actor’s self-identity; (3) how the incident becomes significant for the interests of the actor; and (4) what policies should be taken to pursue interests. First, the actor’s understanding of the causes of the Syrian refugee crisis can be traced through President Obama’s speech on September 11, 2013 (The Telegraph, 11 September 2013). In his speech, President Obama said that the cause of the Syrian refugee crisis was a series of peaceful protests against Bashar Al-Assad’s repressive regime, which turned into a brutal civil war. The worst event in civil war, continued President Obama, occurred on August 21, 2013 when Assad government began using chemical weapons. The two-year period of violent conflict in Syria has resulted in more than 100,000 people dead and millions of refugees. President Obama’s speech can be interpreted as the U.S. seeing this crisis fundamentally caused by the cruelty and tyranny of the Assad regime in power in Syria. This tyrannical regime oppressed people, caused chaos, and cost hundreds of thousands of lives, and brutally forced millions of Syrians to flee seeking protection abroad.

Secondly, the relations of Syrian Refugee crisis meaning to U.S. national identity can be traced to John Kerry’s and President Obama’s speeches. In his speech at the 2013 World Refugee Day commemoration event (US Department of State 20 June 2013), John Kerry used the Syrian
refugee crisis to remind the public that immigration and refugees were part of US identity. By mentioning Emma Lazarus’s poem attached to the Statue of Liberty, symbol of freedom in the U.S., Kerry said that welcoming those who long for freedom is a tradition that is ingrained in the U.S., and one that the U.S. should be proud of. In the speech, Kerry also mentioned historical aspects in U.S. identity. He exemplified the history of John Winthrop, a Puritan refugee who had a vision of a ‘city on a hill’. Kerry indirectly stated that the history of immigration and the tradition of accepting refugees in the U.S. had survived for hundreds of years.

The meaning of the Syrian refugee crisis for the U.S. can also be identified through President Obama’s speech at the World Refugee Day commemoration event the following year (*The White House* 20 June 2014). In his speech, President Obama stated that Syrian civil war had caused the biggest refugee crisis since World War II, and became a benchmark in assessing the good and bad sides of humanity. Adding on that, President Obama mentioned those who have caused casualties and made people displaced reflect the bad side of humanity. On the contrary, those who help refugees displayed noble character, were courageous, and had compassion for humanity. The U.S. shows noble character, courageous soul, and compassion with the amount of humanitarian assistance that has been given to refugees, surpassing the assistance provided by other nations. President Obama also explained that the U.S. did not only provide humanitarian assistance, but has also received more refugees than any other country. President Obama positioned refugees in a context similar to the American people, where their trials and ideals were in line with the American people. Furthermore, he reminded that the United States was a country built by those who fled violence and war for a new life in the new land. Therefore, the predecessors of the nation were not much different from the current era’s refugees. The predecessors and founders of the United States of America worked hard to build a new life on a new land, and that sort of enthusiasm was also shared by refugees who had now arrived in the United States. President Obama also stressed that the arrival and acceptance of refugees needed to be interpreted as a form of continuity of tradition and self-identification of the United States. That is, incoming refugees would be the successor to the immigration

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5*Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses, yearning to breathe free.*
tradition, bringing new dreams and energy to strengthen US national identity.

Third, the Syrian refugee crisis is not materially significant for the interests of the United States, but rather immaterially so. In the context of Syrian refugee acceptance, the United States government’s decision reflected a desire to perpetuate and maintain understanding of identity as a nation of immigrants. In such purpose, U.S increased acceptance of Syrian refugees. This ontological narrative can be traced through President Obama’s speech on November 21, 2015 (The White House 5 May 2017). President Obama showed a tendency to defend American values, which referred to freedom, openness and tolerance. In his speech, President Obama stated that Syrian Muslims who came were mostly pure refugees, meaning they came due to violence and/or persecution in their home country. President Obama saw that neglecting people who were victims of terrorism or tyrannical government was an enormous mistake. Actions taken in such conditions tend to be based on fear and contradict with values that the United States wished to maintain. In terms of time context, President Obama delivered this speech after terrorist attack in Paris, France (The Guardian 14 November 2015), thus he implied accepting refugees was in accordance to freedom, open and tolerance values upheld by U.S. identity and at the same time was not deterred by fear.

In similar vein, President Obama again signified the values of an open and tolerant United States and was not afraid to face this fear in the 2015 Thanksgiving message (Reuters 26 November 2015). In his message, President Obama said that the American tradition and identity should always be maintained, even in the midst of fears of terrorist attacks and other security challenges. He assured the public that the refugee admission system in the U.S. was extremely strict, exceeding regular security checks on other people who came to American soil. This security system was able to accommodate refugees while ensuring national security.

In his speech at Leaders’ Summit on Refugees in September 2016 (The White House 20 September 2016), after the U.S. welcomed 10,000 Syrian refugees, President Obama mentioned two categories of society in dealing with refugees. The first category was people who feared and fortified themselves from refugees, while the second category was those who empathized and saw the reflection of themselves in refugees. President Obama’s statement about categories of people in responding
to refugee crisis has reflexive meaning. The first reflexive meaning is that the speech situated the intended audience, the people of the U.S., in a position close to the refugees. Second, President Obama again referred to U.S. history as a country built by immigrants and refugees. Therefore, in his opinion, closing the door for refugees meant betraying the fundamental values of the U.S. Reflection also occurred when President Obama reminded American people of their history, that is, when Jews who fled from Nazi Germany were not easily accepted in the U.S. The moment was considered not much different from what would happen if US ignored Syrian refugees.

The fourth ontological narrative, namely the policy regarding the crisis of Syrian refugees, includes the provision of humanitarian assistance and accepting Syrian people. Both of these US policies have been analyzed above. On a more general level, President Obama’s administration believed that the complete settlement of the Syrian refugee crisis would be a resolution on Syrian civil war itself. This idea as mentioned in the various discourses described above dwells on the ability of the U.S. to accept Syrian refugees and reassure their national security at the same time. The U.S. acknowledged concerns about national security in accepting Syrian refugees, but continued to ensure that both considerations were not mutually exclusive. In line with ontological security analytical framework, a state actor is not always acting in line with the material security interests. It is easier for U.S. to reject the entry of Syrian refugees, especially after the terrorist attacks in Paris, France. However, the U.S. continued to accept Syrian refugees. The analysis in this section shows the existence of immaterial interests to be achieved by the decisions of the U.S. during President Obama’s administration in accepting Syrian refugees. It is the ontological security interests of the U.S. as a nation of immigrants.

CO-ACTOR DISCOURSE STRATEGIES: THE US AND BEYOND

The fourth component in ontological security is fellow actors’ discourse strategy. This component examines how international actors, both state and non-state, can frame an event to inspire others to change their policies accordance to ontological security needs (Steel 2008: 74). This writing determines individuals who have contributed to the dynamics of the U.S. government nor the international sphere as actors
that should be investigated. Actors other than the U.S. who play a role in this component are quite varied. This research includes discourses on international and national actors. Both have roles in the decision to accept Syrian refugees by the U.S.

Some actors shaped discourses in simple terms and ways. For example, a statement made in an interview or news article regarding the acceptance of Syrian refugees in the U.S. Anna Greene, Director of Policy and Advocacy at the International Rescue Committee (IRC), stated: “This is an emergency crisis. If the United States doesn’t lead, other countries aren’t going to either” (The New York Times 17 April 2015) On another occasion, Greene pushed the U.S. to accept more Syrian refugees as US had sufficient capacity and knowledge to do so (The Guardian 3 September 2015). The pressure to accept Syrian refugees was not only based on the importance of further refugees handling, but also based on the role taken by the U.S. in the previous refugee crises. This perspective can be seen from the insistence raised by David Milliband, president and CEO of the International Rescue Committee. Miliband believes that the U.S., as a country that had long been a place of refuge for so many refugees, should not hesitate to accept more refugees. Moreover, refugee selection and management system in the U.S. had been very strict and safe, thus ensuring American security can be carried out simultaneously. (The Washington Post 19 March 2015).

On the International Rescue Committee website, Miliband reiterated his statement on the importance of U.S. role. Historically, U.S. was a country that led the world in handling refugees. However, Miliband assessed that there was inertia or lack of action in the face of the Syrian refugee crisis. The U.S. needs to show a response to the crisis. The statement was relatively simple: if United States does not lead Syrian refugee crisis management, then there will be other countries that will take the lead in solving this problem. (International Rescue Committee 2 September 2015)

The pressure to accept Syrian refugees did not only come from non-state actors outside the U.S. Individual actors also stated their support—there were 20 former statesmen and high officials the U.S.—including Madeleine Albright and Henry Kissinger, former Secretary of State. They wrote a letter addressed to President Obama and several senators (The New York Times 17 September 2015). In this letter, they also mentioned the acceptance of refugees as part of US tradition. The tense debate between national security and accepting refugees should not be
considered as mutually exclusive. Former Secretary of State Madeleine Albright had her own opinion about accepting Syrian refugees. Albright stated her memories of the past as immigrants. An attempt was made to link the crisis with the ‘self’ of the U.S. through Albright’s words. Albright, who fled Czechoslovakia, found a new life and a good career. (*Time* 17 November 2015)

Those who speak on behalf of non-state actors also raised their voices in encouraging the acceptance of Syrian refugees by the U.S. About 30 CEOs and leaders of humanitarian and human rights organizations expressed their views through a letter. Among the various recommendations given in their letters, the first point to be discussed was increasing the acceptance of Syrian refugees, exceeding the 10,000 set by the Obama administration. In this letter, non-governmental organization (NGO) representatives mentioned the past history of the U.S. They said the need for U.S. to act as a leader in dealing with the refugee crisis, such as in Vietnam, Cuba and Jewish refugee crises beforehand. (*United Nations Association–United States of America* 24 September 2015)

Pope Francis, the leader of all Catholics, also delivered a speech in the U.S. Congress. In his speech, Pope Francis conveyed the meaning of the U.S. as a country built by immigrants. Pope Francis called himself an immigrant child and expressed his views on Americans as descendants of immigrants. With this statement, he placed himself in a position equal to Americans. The fear of strangers is considered inappropriate, because he, like the Americans in his view, is part of ‘foreigners’. Pope Francis invited not to overlook ‘neighbors’. A nation will be developed if there is empathy for others. (*Newsweek* 24 September 2015)

After Pope Francis delivered a speech at the U.S. Congress, eighteen US mayors expressed their support to welcome Syrian refugees. The mayors were members of the Cities United for Immigration Action and supported to increase Syrian refugees number acceptance. They stated, “with the visit of Pope Francis, we understand his vocation for great compassion in the midst of this crisis and stand beside President Obama to support those who ‘travel for the hope of life’.” (*Observer* 24 September 2015)

President Obama quoted Pope Francis’ speech in his own speech. It was aimed to convince Americans that accepting refugees would not threaten national security. In addition, giving help is a moral obligation for humanity. By mentioning that Pope Francis did not
mention a particular religion in his speech on the need to help others, Obama reinforced the idea that giving protection to refugees cannot be conducted based on religion. Protection should always be given to those who need it (The White House 16 November 2017). Antonio Guterres, head of UNHCR at that time, also encouraged U.S. to accept Syrian refugees. Concerns about terrorism among Syrian refugees were considered uncommon (Al Monitor 27 October 2015) and stated that accepting refugees was a humanitarian tradition of the U.S (USA Today 19 November 2015). The analysis in this section has shown how various actors outside of President Obama’s administration participated in encouraging the U.S. to do more in accepting Syrian refugees. In conveying their views, these non-government actors repeatedly linked the Syrian refugee acceptance policy to the identity of the United States as a country built by immigrants and refugees, as well as its past leadership experience in dealing with refugee crisis post-World War II.

CONCLUSION

Based on the analysis demonstrated in the previous section, this paper concludes that the ontological security needs encourage the U.S. to accept Syrian refugees. This decision reflects the need of the U.S. to maintain its conception of itself as a nation of immigrants through actions reinforcing that conception. The fulfillment of the ontological security of the U.S. can be seen from the confirmation of the self-concept of the U.S. that emerged from the continuity between its identity as a nation of immigrants and a response to the crisis of Syrian refugees. This finding confirms the theoretical argument that state actor takes social action to meet the need for self-identity, even when these actions are not always in line with the need for security of physical existence.

The acceptance of Syrian refugees by the U.S. reflects the need of the U.S. to maintain its ontological security. The ideas and values perpetuated as the uniqueness of the U.S., its role as a world leader, and its role among international actors and environments illustrates how the U.S. achieved and implemented the decision to accept Syrian refugees. The humanitarian crisis has become a means of proving the quality of the actors, including the U.S. When dealing with humanitarian issues that are perceived as a threat, state actor response will reflect the ‘self’ of the country. However, it cannot be denied that the debate over security concerns still has an influence on the acceptance decision.
This is derived from the number of Syrian refugees received as not comparable with the number of Syrian refugees who seek protection in other countries. This article acknowledges that in this aspect the security interests are not completely ignored. The security consideration can be seen from the number of refugees accepted by the U.S., as if there is a compromise between ontological security and traditional security. However, it is the decision to open up to Syrian refugees that reflected the U.S.’ need for ontological security. While it is “easier” to completely reject Syrian refugees, there is an attempt by the U.S. to continue to accept and maintain its identity as a nation of immigrants and refugees.

From an academic perspective, this paper paves the way to enrich the intersection of security studies with studies of international migration. Theoretically, ontological security is the realm of security studies that has not been widely explored. Ideational and non-material factors such as the state’s identity and conception of itself are worth exploring more deeply. Ontological security, as a form of non-traditional security, can contribute greatly to the study of international migration that is of a multidisciplinary nature. In practical terms, this study provides an overview of the country’s perceptions in dealing with humanitarian crises. This perception can be used by international actors to encourage the state to act more in dealing with humanitarian crises. Such utilization, as a component of the discourse strategy of fellow actors in ontological security theory, can be in the form of framing cases or problems by placing them in the context of state identity.

After applying the ontological security theory in the acceptance of Syrian refugees by the U.S. and successfully answering research question, this paper sheds a light that ontological security analytical framework is still far from perfect and has potential space for exploration. The first component in this theory, namely material and reflexive capabilities, is the aspect that mostly limits the application of this theory freely in various cases of humanitarian crises. This theory tends to only be applicable in the case of a state or actor who views himself as a powerful actor. Power can be seen from how the state perceives its role and capabilities in the world. Countries that do not factually have large material capabilities will find it difficult to reflect that capability against a humanitarian crisis, so that the ontological security component is difficult to fulfill. This theory becomes limited only to countries or actors who not only see themselves as powerful but indeed factually have more capabilities than other actors.
Another aspect that can be improved and refined in ontological security theory is the division of analysis into four components. Each component has criteria and explanation that are not same/similar, but when applied, various data and analyzes potentially overlap. For example, an explanation in the first component can function in other components. As if there was a contradiction between the theories formulated by Steele and its application, even by Steele himself (2008, 2007, 2005). Steele’s (2008) writing in Ontological Security in International Relations tends to be presented as a narrative that does not limit analysis rigorously into four components. However, ontological security theory’s problem does not eliminate its academic value. On the contrary, these aspects should encourage the scholar of international security and migration studies to do more research using ontological security so that the theory continues to develop.

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