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Turkey's Somalia Adventure: the Quest for Soft Power and Regional Recognition

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Abstract: This paper examines a unique dimension in contemporary Turkish foreign policy: “Turkish exceptionalism” in the Middle East. “Turkish exceptionalism” is the coupling of political altruism, embedded in Prime Minister Erdoğan’s personal international agenda, with Turkish “soft power” in the Muslim world to assist failed states. With Such policies simultaneously advance Turkey’s national interests and objectives that further its international power and prestige. By demonstrating this relationship in statecraft *vis-à-vis* Turkey’s involvement in rebuilding and stabilising Somalia, this “new” aspect of its foreign policy can be decrypted. This paper also argues that while Turkey’s intention to be a responsible power in Somalia is genuine, the wider geo-politics of Turkey advancing its *raison d'etat* is coupled within this paradigm. As Turkey’s latent power grows, it will seek out similar opportunities to use its soft power via international autism to achieve its wide-ranging national interests of becoming a regional and global power.

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Introduction

On August 10, 2011, while addressing his Justice and Development Party's (AKP) Expanded Provincial Leaders Convention, Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan suddenly and surprisingly announced that he and his family would soon go to Mogadishu as part of Turkey's humanitarian relief effort in Somalia.ⁱ During his trip, Erdoğan stated that he would deliver approximately \$115 million (USD-2011) in humanitarian assistance that the Turkish public had raised for Turkish Red Crescent operations, while also fostering awareness of the devastating effects of Somalia's on-going famine and decades old civil-war.ⁱⁱ Nine days later, on August 19, Erdoğan made his unprecedented journey to Mogadishu that made him the first leader from outside Africa to officially visit Somalia in almost 20 years.ⁱⁱⁱ Although this seminal event was often overshadowed by the events unfolding concurrently unfolding in Libya and the Middle East, the success and context of Erdoğan's mission to Mogadishu showcased Turkey's first independent international engagement (under Erdoğan's AKP) that had an objective of extending its global reach. Turkey's Somali Adventure also demonstrated Turkish desire to become a more autonomous and engaging regional and global actor.

The case of Somalia is a significant event in Turkish foreign policy, as it highlights its engagement and leadership in an area that the international community has been unable to solve and unwilling to fully commit its resources to since the Battle of Mogadishu in 1993.^{iv} Somalia can also be regarded as an instance of "Turkish exceptionalism" in the Middle East, in which Turkish "soft power" was sturdy enough to "influence outcomes" in a place where other states could not obtain similar results. Additionally, Turkey was able to influence politics in Somalia without incurring external or internal punishment for their actions.^v Thus, Somalia represents both Turkey's desire to become a global leader and an example of how Turkish statecraft has managed to incorporate elements of Erdoğan's international "altruism" (soft power) in order to advance Turkey's own *raison d'etat*

In order to demonstrate why the Somali case allows Ankara to become globally influential via soft power (Erdoğan's international altruism), I begin by providing background information regarding Somalia's plight to illustrate that Turkish engagement is both altruistic but also self-serving. I subsequently outline the international benefits that Turkey has reaped by "opening up" Somalia. Finally, I discuss the importance of regional recognition and soft power as a key component in Turkey's Somali Adventure, and demonstrate that Turkey desires to be internationally recognized as an autonomous and important state in world affairs can be understood as a combination of these two threads.

Background:

Before delving into the political objectives of Turkey, it is first important to contextualize the region and risk associated with Turkish engagement in Somalia. During the last two decades, Somalia has been without a formal government that controls its mandated borders. In fact, although Somalia is a recognized as a single, unitary state by the international community, it is perhaps better described as three states with distinct populations and national visions: (i) In North Somalia, the Puntland people have set up an informal quasi-autonomous state (akin to Kurdistan in Northern Iraq), (ii) in the North-West

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of the country, 'Somaliland' was proclaimed as an independent state; and (iii) Mogadishu and South Somalia are theoretically under the control of the *Transitional Federal Government (Dowladda Federaalka Kumeelgaarka)*, though there is widespread lawlessness and anarchy, as well as the continued threat from *al-Shabaab*.^{vi} The fall of Siad Barre's dictatorship in 1991 marked the onset of Somalia's downward spiral towards immense instability, political and social turmoil, and human suffering, in which no governing entity was able to provide basic services to its citizenry. This state of anarchy is accompanied by a constant state of civil war along ethnic and sectarian lines. In many ways, this state that straddles the eastern most edge of "the horn of Africa" has become a modern day example of what Thomas Hobbes theorized as the "war of all against all"; with the absence of a centralized authority (Leviathan), life has become "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short" for almost all Somali's.^{vii} Its internal turmoil has also caused great external trepidation throughout the international community, due to the continued threat of piracy upon international commerce, *al-Shabaab*, which until recently controlled most of Somalia's southern territory.^{viii} Unfortunately, the observation by Anna Husarska of the International Rescue Committee that Somalia is in a state of "endless hell" accurately depicts its condition during the 1990s and 2000s.^{ix}

*From the early 1990s onwards, the international community has tried in vain to stabilize Somalia and bring about a resolution of this on-going conflict; however, the fallout from the now infamous 1993 "Black Hawk Down" incident, which prompted the pullout of United Nations and United States forces in March of 1995, made future peacekeeping action in Somalia both risky and limited during the subsequent decade.^x Throughout this time, Somalia was mostly ignored by the international community; even after the attacks on September 11, 2001 and U.S. President's George W. Bush's declaration of a "war on terrorism", this place of endless hell was virtually forgotten and consigned into the dustbin of history. Often the weighted risks and costs for stabilizing Somali have been considered very high given the continuous anarchic nature throughout the country, and the failure of previous peacekeeping and aide missions. However, Somalia finally started receiving attention by international media outlets and states in 2008, when the Saudi Aramco super tanker *Sirius Star* was hijacked by pirates, and *al-Shabaab* made inroads in taking control of Mogadishu. Later that year, the international community declared Somalia a "frontline" state on the war on terrorism.^{xi}*

*During the next three years, multi-national African Union forces (especially the Ethiopian army) conducted a plethora of cross-border incursions with the mission of stabilising and assisting the beleaguered Transitional Federal Government from insurgents. Although this process seemed minimal, there was a renewed effort to stabilise Somalia's political landscape and give the transitional government time to organise security. However, most of these attempts failed; even as recently as the week before Erdoğan's visit *al-Shabaab* controlled vast territory deep into Mogadishu and virtually all of south Somalia. In later October 2011, a joint task force consisting of the Somali, Kenyan, and Ethiopian militaries (and other Western Powers such as Denmark and France as military advisers) launched Operation Linda Nchi, which successfully crushed *al-Shabaab*, but did not effectively ended the Somali Civil War (the primary objective- although the security situation has greatly improved).^{xii}*

Somalia has long been a failed state and problematic for the international community, which has poured many resources into stabilising the country; this aid is meant to in ensure that the access point to the Red Sea remains open and shipping routes are protected.

However, the international community has not been able to penetrate internal Somalia to provide humanitarian assistance, as the security situation has been too grave and humanitarian workers have been targeted for either helping the “wrong clan or group” or are seen as an attempt of the re-colonization of Somalia by Western powers.^{xiii} In providing humanitarian assistance, Turkey has been received by Somalis with considerably less hostility than other states; the Turkish Red Crescent has already “distributed 5,000 tons of humanitarian aid in Somalia since August 2011” and has reportedly been welcomed and well-received by most of the people.^{xiv}

Erdoğan has opened the door for Somalia to become a functioning state; however, it would be mistaken to interpret his emphasis on development of Somalia as an attempt to contain external security threats—a myopic outlook which has undermined previous stabilisation efforts. His long time plan that was outlined in his well-received return briefing entailed “The Tears of Somalia”, in which Erdoğan announced that Turkey would help the Transitional Federal Government (TFG) and other institutions in Somalia:

... Include[s] lending political support in the fields of health, education, and transportation, and envisages the provision of a 400-bed hospital, garbage trucks for the streets of Mogadishu, a waste-disposal facility, metalling of the main highway between Mogadishu and its airport, renovation of the parliamentary and other government buildings, sinking of water wells, and development of agriculture and animal husbandry. These works will be coordinated from Turkey’s proposed embassy in Mogadishu.^{xv}

If Turkey is successful in turning around Somalia and stabilising the internal politics of this perpetually anarchic country, it will not only become a quasi-benefactor state, but will also demonstrate the vast and wide-ranging influence of Turkey in the Muslim world. Most importantly, Turkey’s efforts would bring about international legitimacy that might allow it to become involved in the decision-making processes of other pressing geo-political issues and crises.

Opening Somalia:

Shortly after Erdoğan’s journey to Mogadishu, Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu stated that one major objective of the trip was to break down the perception “that nobody can go to Mogadishu”; ergo, “if we came, many others can come”.^{xvi} Knowing that leadership by example is the cornerstone for soft power success, Erdoğan’s personal journey to Mogadishu was aimed to be the event that would assist Somalia in re-entering the community of nations through example; however, it would also show that Turkey has far-reaching power to accomplish this seemingly impossible task. Three months after Erdoğan landed in Mogadishu, U.N. Secretary General Ban Ki-moon also visited on a fact-finding and humanitarian tour.^{xvii} Afterwards, British Foreign Secretary William Hague made the trek out to Mogadishu, and for the first time in twenty-years “the world’s most failed state” was showing signs of success and strong international engagement.^{xviii} Erdoğan’s trip to Somalia was just the first of many strategically calculated moves to demonstrate the reach of Turkish influence and soft power.

Adding to the opening of Somalia, a Turkish Airlines Boeing 737-800 landed on the tarmac of Mogadishu's Aden Adde International Airport on March 6, 2012. On board this flight were many high-ranking Turkish officials, including Deputy Prime Minister Bekir Bozdağ, Somali President Sharif Sheikh Ahmed, Minister of Defence Hussein Arab Isse, and other prominent members of the Transitional Federal Government gathered on the tarmac.^{xix} Normally, such an event is routine and customary throughout the world. But as discussed

previously, Somalia is not a normal case and this event became yet another unique and promising gathering to showcase an improving Somalia, commemorating Turkish Airlines' new twice weekly Istanbul- Khartoum- Mogadishu route. The Somali Foreign Minister Abdullahi Haji announced at the gathering that he hopes the new route will “make it easier for the Somali diaspora to come home. It will bring us closer together.”^{xx} As Somalia is being reopened to the world, it is the Turks who are playing an essential role in not only moving people, but also taking the risk to engage in a very turbulent and unsure place.

Similar to U.S. President Richard Nixon's trip that “opened” China in 1972 and showed the world that the People's Republic could be a responsible and non-revisionist power, Erdoğan's visit to Somalia has given leaders a renewed energy and focus that this war-ravaged country can become a stable member of the international political system. This is no minor accomplishment, given the political turmoil that has plagued Somalia over the last two decades. With the momentum of recent successes against *al-Shabaab* and the growing sense of stability in Somalia, the British hosted a meeting on Somalia and invited many world leaders to pledge increased support for measures to fight piracy and terrorism, and bring about political stability in Somalia by substantially increasing international funding for the African Union military operation in the country.^{xxi} In his speech to the conference, David Cameron, the British Prime Minister, stated that:

Despite the huge challenges still ahead, when the British Foreign Secretary visited Mogadishu he saw a growing confidence returning to the streets. Shops re-opening, homes being rebuilt, a city beginning to get back on its feet again...That fatalism has failed Somalia. And it has failed the international community too. Today we have an unprecedented opportunity to change that. There is a real momentum right now. International aid has pulled Somalia back from the brink of the humanitarian crisis.^{xxii}

With a renewed commitment by the international community, Somalia seems to be turning a page in a long and dark chapter of its long history. Although the Western engagement in Somalia is proliferating in recent months, and there is a sense that there is a unique opportunity to achieve a measureable amount of stability and development. Turkey has already won its foreign policy victory and has achieved wide-ranging geo-political support, coupled with boasting its soft power and international recognition.

The outlying success of this case has shown that the Turkish government knows how to utilize its soft power influence, but also understands that it requires leading by example. Joseph Nye, in particular stresses this point in soft power deployment when he wrote: “in the business world, smart executives know that leadership is not just a matter of issuing commands, but also involves leading by example and attracting others to do what you want”.^{xxiii} Similar too most political leaders, Erdoğan understands that soft power comes from a state's “ability to establish preferences...[which] tends to be associated with intangible assets such as an attractive personality, culture, political values and institutions, and policies that are seen as legitimate or having moral authority. If a leader represents values that others want to follow, it will cost less to lead”.^{xxiv} Therefore, the opening of Somalia was not only about *raison d'etat*, but also represents Erdoğan's own view of global leadership that is supported domestically as well as internationally; yet the uniqueness of this case have been Turkey's ability to still accomplish several important international objectives.

Subsequently, an understanding of why Turkey wanted to engage in Somalia starts to crystallize when one looks beyond just the notion of altruism and mulls over other geo-political objectives that are within the framework of *raison d'etat*. This does not say that

Erdoğan is not altruist in nature; that he took his entire family to a very dangerous place shows a certain personal belief or commitment to humanitarian relief. However, what makes Turkish foreign policy unique is that it can take an altruist tone or mission, yet its presence in a place such as Somalia is less tremulous than those of Western powers, given its lineage as a non-colonial power and a Muslim country. Turkish exceptionalism in this case adds to a rational choice of engaging in Somalia, because the payoffs over the long run are very lucrative: it enhances Turkish soft power while building its regional status as an emerging world power.

Turkish Objectives:

As mentioned previously, Turkish foreign policy in regards to Somalia has linked Erdoğan's altruist predisposition and worldview of how Turkey should behave in the international system, while strategically implementing a policy that positively moves forward Turkish national interests. In doing so, the outcome in Somalia has given Turkey a strategic advantage in North Africa (a foothold into the continent), but also has increased Turkish soft power that will further propagate further cases of Turkish exceptionalism, which is currently unravelling in regards to the Civil War in Syria.

Soft Power

Ankara for the latter part of the last decade has been on a quest to solidify its regional standing and influence by enhancing its soft power throughout the Middle East. Soft Power as defined in Nye as: the utilization of a state's culture, language, and media "to obtain what one wants through co-optation and attraction".^{xxv} By moving away from emulating the United States or Europe (Kemalist/Military/ Özal's foreign policy) and trying to forge its own independent foreign policy, Turkey has redefined its "strategic depth" by not shunning the Arab and Muslim world and fully engaging those states on its periphery. By boasting its soft power to demonstrate it has increased its own importance and fortunes in the Middle East, Turkey has successfully used its cultural and religious heritage as the successor state of the Ottoman Empire, and its recent emergence of a regional power, as a tool to achieve its geopolitical objectives, while maintaining Erdoğan's own view of Turkey being a responsible (altruist) power.

In the foreign policy arena, Erdoğan also scored high marks. A Pew Research poll just before the elections in June illustrated that "about six-in-ten (62%) Turks have a great deal of or some confidence he to do the right thing in world affairs."^{xxvi} The same poll indicated that people believed that: "under Erdoğan's leadership, Turkey has played a more assertive role in international affairs and most Turks give the prime minister positive marks on foreign policy."^{xxvii} Furthermore, since Prime Minister Erdoğan's now infamous "walk out" at the 2009 Davos conference, he became the most popular figure in the Middle East almost overnight.^{xxviii} This trend has led to immense benefits in seeking cooperation with "post" Arab Awakening states such as Libya, Tunisia, and Egypt, whose populations and governments have embraced parts of the "Turkish Model".^{xxix}

Even the United States and Europe have come under the "spell" of Turkey's soft power, as those states tout Turkey to be a model for the Islamic World and have been (2002-2005 and 2010-present) staunch supporters of the ruling government: "[the AKP's] coming to power comprises an asset for the Turkish model, as it demonstrates both the evolution of the

Islamist movement in Turkey, and the potential for reconciling democracy and Islam.”^{xxx}

With support from Western governments and a deep support and gratitude from the Somali government towards Erdoğan, Turkey has uniquely positioned itself as the custodian of Somalia and gateway into that region. Speaking to this point, the Somali ambassador to Turkey, Nur Sheikh Hamud Mursal, has stated that Somalia regrets having discovered Turkey very late and that the relationship blossoming between the two countries, while he has categorized that:

“[t]he Somali people see Turkey as a savior sent by God to Somalia. Somali people are looking at Turkey not as a foreign country but as their real brother. Turkey did lots of things in a short time and it is really amazing. Turkey is helping us in many fields: education, health, construction.”^{xxxi}

In the Somalia case Turkish soft power has also translated into results for its wider geo-political objectives of achieving regional power by demonstrating Turkey’s ability to influence its desired outcomes. Currently, as Turkey's power grows, it is only logical that it would want to establish itself more independently from any other great power(s). However, given Turkey's unique geographical location, (bordered by the European Union, Russia, Iran, and the wider Middle East), it has vast potential to maximize its both hard power (as Turkey's military remains the second largest armed forces in NATO) and soft power. The economic growth has resulted in a renewed confidence in Turkey that continues to underpin these two threads. All of these factors have created a new relationship between domestic and international outlooks and a new domestic audience. First, soft power plays to the AKP’s base; to the party can play the “neo-Ottoman” card domestically while bringing their Muslim neighbours closer through a sharing of heritage. Second, internationally, the benefits are two-fold as Turkish soft power offers a different cultural perspective to Middle Eastern states, which then in turn makes engagement with those states easier, as it creates payoffs through increased trade and economic cooperation.

International Recognition:

Over the last five years, Turkey’s international power has increased, as its economy has been performing exceptionally well, with high-growth and relatively low-inflation;. This growth has been accompanied by its political system gradually stabilising, hence reducing the prospects of military interventions. With a growing economy and a gradual improvement in its democratic credentials, Turkey has been hailed by the West as a model state for the Middle East and a model for democracy given its ability to reconcile Islam and democratic principles. Also, given the recent events in the Middle East, Turkey is also touted as a source of stability in region that is constantly in flux. This has elevated Turkey’s international profile and geostrategic importance to not only the United States and the West, but also with Russia, and Iran, which all have look for a friendship in the Turkish Republic.

This has given Turkey a seat at the table to be a leading state in some important international issues. Having a seat for some states is a matter of national honour and for others is prestigious; however, it also has an important utility given that states engaged in a process are usually provided with fruitful results or payoffs. This is especially true for states that are global powers or have aligned interests with the strongest power, such as those in the UNSC or G-20. Turkey has been increasingly active in a plethora of issues world-wide; such as the ongoing Arab Spring, the Syrian Civil-War, the NATO missile shield, an actor of interest in mediating the Arab-Israeli conflict, and now the patriarch of Somalia. The courting of Turkey to assist in international issues is only matched by its eagerness to be involved.

Currently, with Erdoğan being the most popular leader in the Middle East for several years, Turkey represents an ideal country to help decide global issues in the Middle East.^{xxxii}

Although they now have a seat at the table, the Turks have learned an important lesson about being subjugated to another power's foreign policy, which Kenneth Waltz in his seminal work *A Theory of International Relations* refers to as bangwagoning.^{xxxiii} For example, during the Cold War and again during Gulf War I, Turkey kowtowed to American policy to achieve payoffs for widespread cooperation and standing behind the U.S. Then-President Turgut Özal assumed that by cooperating with the United States and allowing the U.S. to use Turkish airspace to attack targets in Iraq and Kuwait and also use its territory to establish a second front in Northern Iraq, Turkey in return would receive high levels of economic assistance from the U.S and other Gulf and coalition members. Although a \$4.2 billion defence fund was set up for Turkey, the embargo imposed on Iraq after the war and the effects of the war itself ravaged the Turkish economy due to “the loss of income [from the] Iraq-Turkey pipeline, large scale disruption of bilateral trade as well as the border trade and the unemployment that this caused in south-eastern region, [and] Iraq's non-payment of its debts to Turkey.”^{xxxiv}

As a result of the deep economic losses incurred by Turkey's support of the First Gulf War, it appealed to the United Nations and evoked Article 50 of its Charter, which stipulates:

If preventive or enforcement measures against any state are taken by the Security Council, any other state, whether a Member of the United Nations or not, which finds itself confronted with special economic problems arising from the carrying out of those measures shall have the right to consult the Security Council with regard to a solution of those problems.^{xxxv}

However, unlike the Jordanians, who did not participate in the coalition that invaded Iraq and stood close to Saddam Hussein during the war (most likely in a bid to appease the Palestinian demographic of its population), Turkey could not persuade the U.S to support them in the United Nations Security Council. And unlike the Jordanians, who received compensation under Article 50, they did not receive any compensation for their losses during the aftermath of the war.^{xxxvi}

It was these events at the end of the Cold War and during the first Gulf War that would remain at the forefront of policy makers' minds; they who came to realize that “cooperation with the U.S in a crisis was a natural consequence of the convergence of Turkey's interests with America's. However, this had to be weighed against Turkey's losses and Turkey's cooperation with Iraq on the Kurdish questions over many years.”^{xxxvii} Turkey would not forget the events that happened at the tail end of the Cold War and the Gulf War I, and decided to become self-reliant an autonomous actor when possible.

Thus, when Turkey felt confident enough to take action in Somalia, it decided to do it alone and to establish itself as the principal power to engage in that area, by first opening it up to the West and others by demonstrating it had the reach and soft power to do as such. Domestically, many Turks have embraced the concept of an engaged and proactive Turkey as a strong and independent Turkey. This approach not only opens up new markets but also shows a stronger and more powerful state internationally.^{xxxviii} As Turkey becomes a more proactive member of the international community and demonstrates its ability to influence outcomes that achieves international security and peace, its recognition as a global power starts to crystallize through its engagement its efforts in Somalia and Syria. Also, as the

United States disengages from the Middle East to focus more intently on Asia, Turkey has position itself to fill in the void that will occur concurrently with American disengagement.

The Somalia advantage thus makes decent geo-political sense as Turkey relied heavily on votes from Africa when it won a seat as a non-permanent member on the UN Security Council in 2009. Ankara is hoping to repeat this feat in 2015 (as well as becoming a permanent member when/if the UNSC reforms itself) and maintain its current status as a responsible global power and its enhances its soft power to continuing its influential position in the international political system.

Conclusion

The growing influence of the Turkish Republic stems from a unique mixture of taking Prime Minister Erdoğan's worldview of what constitutes being a "responsible power" and coupling it with advancing its *raison d'etat vis-à-vis* soft power that achieves greater global recognition and thus political power to a status as an active global actor. By looking beyond the notion of altruism (yet not discounting) or pure political realism, this paper has demonstrated that both threads working in tandem constitutes a new approach in the implementation of Turkish statecraft. It also provides an explanation for why Turkey was both risking and willing to engage in Somalia as a mechanism to accomplish wide-ranging geo-political goals. Turkey's engagement in Somalia illustrates some of the many changing aspect in Turkish foreign policy, and is a "tipping of their hand" event, as it sends a clear message of its national interests and objectives in the short to medium term.

Given the success and payoffs received by Turkey for their efforts in Somalia, Turkey has been tipped by the West to be the prime actor in finding a solution for the Civil War taking place in Syria and as a leading state in the Middle East and Muslim world. Furthermore, Turkey's Somalia adventure might be a model for continued behaviour in Turkish foreign policy: to engage neighbouring failed states and implement a development and stabilising mission to bring those states back as function and contributing states of the international community. Although, Turkey has received much attention over its role in the Arab Awakening, its mission to Somalia an example of Turkey's new statecraft when its independent to act under its own accord.

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Endnotes:

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^{xxix}. For a discussion on how the so-called “Turkish Model” can affect the Arab Spring see: Bâli (2011) *A Turkish Model for the Arab Spring?*

^{xxx}. Altuniskik (2008) *The Possibilities and Limits of Turkey’s Soft Power in the Middle East*.

^{xxxi}. Cengiz (2012) *Somali ambassador Nur Sheikh Hamud Mursal: We regret discovering Turkey very late*.

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^{xxxiii}. Waltz, Kenneth (1979). *A Theory of International Politics*, pages 118-119.

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^{xxxv}. See United Nations Charter *Article 50* for a complete version of that text.

^{xxxvi}. Oran (2010) *Turkish Foreign Policy, 1919-2006*, page 681

^{xxxvii}. Oran (2010) *Turkish Foreign Policy, 1919-2006*, page 682

^{xxxviii}. For a further discussion on domestic payoffs for foreign policy independence in Turkey see [Gullo](#) (2012) *Turkish Foreign Policy: Neo-Ottomanism 2.0 and the Future of Turkey’s Relations with the West*.