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Blanca Palacián de Inza

The three keys of the Sublime Porte in Somalia

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Abstract:

Through the metaphor of the 'three keys'—military steel, economic gold, and cultural silk—this document analyses how Ankara has established an unprecedented systemic dominance in the Horn of Africa. However, with the Red Sea in flames and a domestic economy at its limit, neo-Ottoman ambition is now staking its destiny on a single card: geology.

Keywords:

Neo-Ottomanism 3.0, Smart Power, Geology, Turkification, Hormuz.

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Introduction

The Ottoman Empire in Somalia

Contemporary Türkiye's presence in Somalia is far more comprehensive than it has ever been.

During the Ottoman Empire, this presence was highly significant in North and East Africa from the early 16th century until the beginning of the 20th century¹. It was particularly significant in Egypt, the Maghreb and Libya.

However, in the Horn of Africa it was intermittent and peripheral. Rather than a territorial occupation of the interior², the Turks sought control of areas of the Red Sea for essentially commercial purposes and to protect the pilgrimage routes to Mecca and Medina.

In the specific case of Somalia, although this presence was significant, it was mainly naval and commercial, and was concentrated on the northern and southern coasts.

In the north, it was notable in Somaliland, where the Empire established itself as an Islamic ally against the Christian powers³, with the ports of Zeila and Berbera standing out as key centers of Ottoman administration⁴.

In the south, however, its influence was more indirect, through commercial and military alliances with sultanates such as the Ajuran.

Current Turkish presence in Somalia

Paradoxically, the Turkish presence in North and East Africa today is limited; but in the Horn of Africa, and particularly in Somalia, it is very significant. Today, Ankara directly manages the port of Mogadishu and is responsible for security along the entire Somali coastline.

¹ MELIS, Nicola. "The Ottoman Empire and Africa: The Ottomans in Africa", Eurasian Studies, 21, 2023. Available at [this link](#).

² CHAPIN, Helen (ed.). "Somalia: a country study", Federal Research Division, Library of Congress, 1992. P5 et seq. Available at [this link](#).

³ ALI, Tarig. "Ottomans' Efforts to Protect Somalia against the European Powers", in "Proceedings of the International Symposium on Islamic Civilisation in Eastern Africa", 2006. Available at [this link](#).

⁴ GOVSOMALILAND.ORG. "History". [Available at this link](#).

The main difference from the past lies in the strategic objective: whilst the Empire confined itself to controlling the coastline, modern-day Türkiye maintains a near-omnipresent presence both along the coast and in the country's interior.

Türkiye's current involvement in Somalia stems from Ankara's foreign policy doctrine, known as neo-Ottomanism, which aims to regain economic, military and cultural influence in former imperial territories, and far exceeds its historical scope.

We can speak of a kind of systemic neo-Ottomanism which, following the imperial version and the soft power approach of the early years of Erdoğan's government, has reached version 3.0, through which Türkiye exercises multidimensional dominance in Somalia.

On the one hand, Ankara has its largest embassy in the world there, as well as its most important military base abroad. It trains the elite of the Somali army and has legally assumed responsibility for protecting its waters for a decade⁵. It manages the capital's port and airport, is involved in the energy, fisheries, health and religious sectors, and plans to complete its own rocket launch site on Somali soil in December 2026⁶.

Ankara has therefore executed an impeccable Nyeian⁷ deployment of *smart power*: a strategic blend of military force with cultural, diplomatic and economic seduction (smart power = hard power + soft power).

The Turkish narrative⁸ is structured along these lines, according to which, unlike other powers, it has succeeded in ensuring that Somalia does not perceive this omnipresence as an occupation, but rather as a vital partnership of mutual benefit, positioning Ankara as the architect of a new human geography in the Horn of Africa.

Other voices, however, point to a division of opinion among the local population⁹.

Below, this multidimensional influence and the risks it entails for Türkiye and for Somalia itself will be analysed in greater detail.

⁵ AKIN, Ezgi and FARHAT, Beatrice. "Turkey confirms maritime security agreement in Somalia amid tensions in Somaliland", *AI Monitor*, 22/02/2024. [Available at this link](#).

⁶ EFE. "Somalia expects a Turkish rocket launch station to be completed in 2025", 22/02/2023.

⁷ Nyeian: derived from Joseph Nye's theory of Smart Power.

⁸ NUR, Abdulkadir Mohamed. "Somalis see an intertwined destiny with the Turkish people", *Anadolu Agency*, 13 May 2023. Available at [this link](#).

⁹ EMIRATES POLICY CENTER. "Stakes and Potential Consequences of the Growing Turkish Engagement in Somalia", *Horn of Africa Studies*, Unit. 16/06/2025. Available at [this link](#).

The three keys to the Sublime Porte.

In line with this omnipresence, it can be said that Türkiye holds three keys in Somalia: one of steel, another of gold and, finally, the key of silk.

The steel key: military force.

Ankara has its largest overseas military base in Mogadishu: Turksom. It was inaugurated in 2017 and occupies a 4 km² site facing the Indian Ocean.

The most visible function of this base is to host the training of the Somali elite troops known as the Gorgor, who are trained to combat the terrorist group Al-Shabaab. This training incorporates elements of the silk key, which will be explained later, as these soldiers receive instruction in the Turkish language and according to Turkish standards.

Furthermore, this base serves as a military academy for officers and non-commissioned officers of the Somali regular army, with the Turkish language also being a compulsory part of the curriculum. The ‘turkification’ is complete¹⁰, as these military personnel use Ottoman weapons, operate under Turkish doctrine and speak the Turkish language. As if that were not enough, the most promising cadets receive scholarships to complete their training in Türkiye.

This interdependence is not limited to Turksom. Furthermore, the Somali defence system relies on Türkiye. The Somali skies are patrolled by Turkish Bayraktar TB2 and TB3 drones, whose software and maintenance depend on technicians from Ankara. Armoured vehicles and assault rifles follow this same pattern of dependence.

The *Framework Agreement on Economic and Defence Cooperation*, signed in February 2024¹¹, contains terms that imply delegated defence sovereignty, without Ankara needing permission from NATO—of which it is a member—as it is a bilateral agreement. Türkiye gains full authority at sea and exploitation rights in exchange for providing security against illegal fishing and piracy for ten years, as well as helping to rebuild the Somali navy.

¹⁰ KASAPOGLU, Can. “Turkey’s ‘African Eagle’ Trains Turkish-Speaking Troops in Somalia: Where Next?”, Jamestown, 20/11/2020. Available at [this link](#).

¹¹ DEMİRTAŞ, Tunç. “The Message of the Türkiye-Somalia Agreement and the Alliance with Türkiye”, SETA Foundation, 8 August 2025. Available at

Curiously, although Türkiye assumes responsibility for the security of the entire Somali coastline, including that of Somaliland, this is not exercised *de facto*, as this region has its own agreements with Ethiopia and the United Arab Emirates.

Somalia's ultimate objective in this agreement is to curb any potential move by Ethiopia regarding its ambitions for access to the sea, given that, in January, it had signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with Somaliland, in which it would recognize it as an independent country in exchange for a port.

The golden key: energy independence and resources.

As outlined in the previous point, under the agreement signed in February, Türkiye obtains exploitation rights over Somali waters. This offers Ankara the prospect of an energy haven, which has become vital following recent events in the Strait of Hormuz.

In March 2026, following preliminary seismic surveys, the Turkish deep-sea drilling vessel Çağrı Bey arrived off the Somali coast. If the findings confirm expectations, Türkiye will transition from being an importer to an exporter of hydrocarbons.

Ankara also manages, as mentioned above, critical infrastructure such as the port of Mogadishu and Aden Adde International Airport, two strategic logistics hubs that provide it with growing and substantial profits. Part of these profits is invested in the third pillar: the Silk Road.

The silk key: the 'turkish' generation and human security.

This pillar operates at the intersection of the religious, diplomatic and educational spheres. After declaring 2005 the 'Year of Africa'¹², Ankara has increasingly positioned itself as a leader of the global Muslim community, the *umma*¹³. This constitutes a specifically Islamic form of soft power that serves as a reference point and justification for its presence in Somalia¹⁴.

¹² REPUBLIC OF TURKEY. MINISTRY OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS. "Turkey-Africa: Solidarity and Partnership". Available at [this link](#).

¹³ <https://www.africheorienti.com/journal/article/view/159/149>

¹⁴ [Ibid](#)

Through Diyanet (the Presidency of Religious Affairs of Türkiye), the Maarif Foundation and various NGOs, Turkish-style mosques are being built, academic institutions are training the ‘Turkish’ generation, and humanitarian aid is being distributed during Islamic festivals¹⁵.

This approach has enabled Türkiye to redefine the concept of human security in Somalia. Whilst other powers limit themselves to counter-terrorism, Ankara has linked stability to the provision of basic services, healthcare and humanitarian aid.

There is no shortage of criticism, with some arguing that Türkiye is subtly undermining Somalia’s historical and religious identity by replacing war-damaged mosques with new ones in the Ottoman style. Furthermore, it is replacing the old Saudi mosques, thereby reducing the influence of rival states’ religious soft power in the region. These Turkish actions have at times been perceived as self-serving, disguised under the veil of religion¹⁶.

This is possible because, in the Turkish context, Islamism allows for an instrumental interpretation, enabling political leaders to opt for pragmatism, mercantilism and opportunism, whilst invoking Islamic values and traditions¹⁷.

As part of this soft power, Türkiye presents itself as a diplomatic bridge in regional conflicts. In the specific case of Somalia, it played a significant mediating role between Somalia and Ethiopia between 2024 and 2025, following the MOU signed by the latter and Somaliland¹⁸.

Ankara has also mediated, with less success, in the recent war waged by Israel and the United States against Iran¹⁹. This war, which could affect the Red Sea and its coastal countries, threatens to reverse Türkiye’s presence on Somali soil. The risk is heightened even further when one considers Türkiye’s internal difficulties, which are pressing it to succeed in its investments and business ventures beyond its borders.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ REIFFENSTUEL, Alexander. “The Instrumentalisation of Diyanet’s Islamic Soft Power within Turkey’s Faith-based Foreign Policy in Somalia”, Thesis. 2021. Available at [this link](#).

¹⁷ <https://www.africheorienti.com/journal/article/view/159/149>

¹⁸ ONDITI, Bravin. “The Ankara Initiative: Turkey’s Diplomatic Triumph in the Ethiopia-Somalia Conflict”, Horn International Institute for Strategic Studies, 17/12/2024. Available at [this link](#).

¹⁹ SOYLU, Ragip. “Turkey seeks off-ramp to war through US-Iran negotiations”, Middle East Eye, 23 March 2026. Available at [this link](#).

Türkiye's *smart power* in Somalia, once solid, is becoming as fragile as glass, due both to internal tensions in Türkiye and to recent events in the region.

Türkiye's challenges: the urgency of geology.

Somalia is no longer a project of influence for Türkiye, but a matter of energy survival. The three keys depend on oil. If the Çağrı Bey vessel suffers an incident or drilling fails in the coming months, the neo-Ottoman project in the Horn of Africa could collapse under its own economic weight.

Ankara cannot afford to maintain the military deployment of steel or the welfare provision of silk indefinitely without the immediate return of Somali black gold, the ultimate arbiter of Turkish foreign policy.

The Turkish deployment in Somalia is unfolding on a chessboard crowded with actors with conflicting interests, all eager to fill any vacuum it might leave. Ankara's rivalry with the United Arab Emirates, whose strategy seeks the fragmentation of Somalia, is direct. Egypt, although currently an ally of Mogadishu against Ethiopia, views Turkish hegemony over an increasingly militarized Red Sea with suspicion.

However, the greatest risk factor is the open conflict between Israel, the United States and Iran. The escalation of hostilities places Somalia—and, by extension, Türkiye—in a position of extreme vulnerability, adding to its Achilles' heel: the domestic economic crisis, capable of bringing the African coastal venture to an abrupt halt, leaving Mogadishu orphaned and adrift, at the mercy of other international agendas.

It is to be expected that oil will come to light following the prospecting surveys carried out by Ankara in Somali waters. The discovery of black gold would mean a renaissance for Türkiye; failure, on the other hand, could spell the end of the regime. The greatest risk therefore stems from war, in the form of an attack by Iran or its proxies.

If Israel were to establish a military base in Somaliland to attack the Houthis, the Horn of Africa could be drawn fully into the conflict, which would likely spell the end of Erdogan's government. The other scenario—a de-escalation through the decapitation of the Iranian regime and the normalisation of traffic through the Strait of Hormuz—would be the most beneficial for both Türkiye and Somalia.

The war affects all three keys, making Somalia the only possible gateway in Türkiye 's headlong rush forward. If not, the steel key will rust, the golden key will vanish and the key of faith will break.

The contract for gas imports from Iran to Türkiye expires in mid-2026. Extracting oil and gas from Somali waters has become Türkiye 's top national security priority. With Turksom and control of the ports, Ankara is in a privileged position, able to become a distributor of crude oil to Europe.

It is an all-or-nothing gamble: either Türkiye becomes an energy power, or we will witness the end of the neo-Ottoman dream, driven by social pressure under the slogan: 'Bread in Istanbul, not oil in Mogadishu'.

Conclusions.

Türkiye 's involvement in Somalia goes beyond the initial humanitarian aid to become a multidimensional endeavour. It is a new version of the neo-Ottomanism —neo-Ottomanism 3.0— in which smart power is deployed through the keys of steel, gold and silk, redefining Somali sovereignty and human geography.

The Turkish influence on the elites and infrastructure places the Somali state in a position of dependence tied to Türkiye 's success in the geological sphere.

Oil will be the ultimate arbiter of Ankara's foreign and domestic policy, in an all-or-nothing game in the waters of the Indian Ocean.

If the resources do not flow, social urgency will impose the logic of 'bread in Istanbul' over geopolitical ambition in Mogadishu, closing the door and throwing the keys into the sea.

Blanca Palacián de Inza
IEEE Analyst