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Turkey’s Soft Power Capacity: Geopolitics of Aviation and the Turkish Airlines

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With its more than 290 flight destinations, Turkish Airlines emerges as Turkey’s new face of transportation and a major facilitator of Turkey’s international reputation. The airlines’ continental connections and in-flight services help Turkey’s visibility not only in the air but also on the ground, as being the one of nation’s image-making instruments and a national trademark. In this framework, this paper focuses on Turkish Airlines’ contribution to Turkey’s soft power capability while being essential to public diplomacy in the future.

Key words: Turkish Airlines, Geopolitics of Aviation, Soft Power, Turkey, Public Diplomacy

Our world has become smaller and smaller than ever because of recent developments in communication and transportation technologies. Almost every aspect of our lives now depends on the movement of goods, ideas, and people which is made possible by these developments across the world. With no doubt this makes us all independent as well as interdependent. We now have more information about places, peoples, and events in faraway geographies which were not possible a century ago. Thanks to innovation in aviation technology, we now can move freely from one continent to another within less than twenty-four hours.

This rapid development in transportation technologies brought together civilizations which have had no shared borders and they have now become new neighbors and allies. For instance, in the past no one would imagine that Japan would be a commercial partner and close ally with Europe. This is due to modern technological developments in conjunction with the geopolitical needs of nations. As mankind advanced in technology for the better, time and space shrank to their advantage, and those who possessed the better and more advanced transportation technology also became better at international trade and in turn, at influencing other cultures and peoples (Harvey 1990). Airline industries and transportation businesses are no exception to the benefits of technolog-
ical developments. The better an airline company grasps the time’s needs and demands, the more it becomes top of the line in the aviation sector.

Airline industries not only transfer people from one point to another, they also help connect geographies and their people who may be structurally disadvantaged by connecting them to the more developed world. This unique service of an airline can minimize physical borders that were impassable before. The Somaliland case is a good example of this. A You Tuber and several Hollywood artists including Ben Stiller campaigned for Turkish Airlines, which is currently the only airline to fly to Mogadishu, to fly to Somalia with food and water. Thousands of volunteers joined together and collected millions of dollars in a day (Lansdown 2017). Turkish Airlines immediately answered the call of the international campaign and within a week flew to Somalia loaded with humanitarian supplies. This small example shows that connecting places not only brings economic advantages to airlines but also helps them to improve their image and reputation worldwide. The call for help from Somalia was for sure a positive lift for Turkish Airlines.

Turkish Airlines - which advertises itself as being the one of the best airlines and uses the motto of ‘widen your world’ is pushing the limits of the airline service sector. While desiring to be one of the top airlines in the world, Turkish Airlines also helps itself by making substantial contributions to Turkey’s modernization and image-making efforts. By doing this, the airline aims to be one of the vital instruments of soft power as a flag carrier of Turkey. With its more than 290 flight destinations, Turkish Airlines emerges as Turkey’s new face of transportation and a major facilitator of Turkey’s international reputation. The airlines’ continental connections and in-flight services help Turkey’s visibility not only in the air but also on the ground, as being the one of the nation’s image-making instruments and a national trademark. In this framework, this paper focuses on Turkish Airlines’ contribution to Turkey’s soft power capability while being essential to public diplomacy in the future. In the following sections, we will briefly discuss the dynamics of soft power and its usefulness for a nation’s foreign policy, international visibility, and public diplomacy. We then will examine Turkish Airlines as being one of Turkey’s soft power instruments via its new destinations and international marketing strategies. Finally, we sum up by arguing how a nation’s aviation sector can go hand in hand with their geopolitical aspirations. In this sense, our argument becomes that sometimes airlines not only operate for commercial benefits, but they also create a condition through which third-world nations can easily connect to international destinations. In other words, they become the only means for peoples to connect to other geographies, peoples and opportunities. However, we need to note here that comfortable service of airlines comes with a prohibitive
price tag for the economically disadvantaged and hinders developing nations’ connections with the developed world. Unless airlines offer affordable prices, less developed nations’ connections to the developed nations becomes limited if not remaining one way only.

Background on Soft Power as an Instrument of Foreign Affairs

Power is a much contested and equally complicated concept in political theory and international relations (Gray 2011). It is widely defined as “the ability to affect the outcomes you want and, if necessary, to change the behavior of others to make this happen” (Nye 2002, p. 4). Here, Nye does not make any measurable difference between hard and soft power. As long as one gets others to act in a way that meets his/her wants or needs. Nye, however, in his further works distinguishes hard power by highlighting its militarist and forcible face in foreign relations in contrast to the nature of soft power, which is mostly operated without the use of force or threat. In the literature, hard power is generally defined as a strategy which focuses on “military intervention, coercive diplomacy, and economic sanctions to enforce national interests” (Wilson 2008, 114). In a world of sovereign states, this version of power is typically tied to the nation states and their military capability in the anarchic world. In other words, scholars of international area studies associate hard power with the philosophical argument from the realist school of thought. In this sense, state’s power and the capability of imposing sanctions on others in the world’s geopolitical order is measured by military capacity and economic dominance. In contrast to the realist school of thought, liberal scholars emphasize soft power as an essential source of statecraft focusing on the capability to influence other nations to act in a way that one wants. Similarly, Gray defines soft power as “the ability to have influence by co-opting others to share some of one’s values and, as a consequence, to share some key elements on one’s agenda for international order and security” (Gray 2011, V). Here we see that a nation has the ability to influence other nations in a softer manner without imposing any kind of military or economic threat or force.

In reference to Nye’s analysis of soft power, we then introduce a nation’s cultural and political assets to accomplish a job that can’t be done through the use of force or threat. In this sense, scholars of soft power put more emphasis on the attractiveness of culture, education, and entertainment as being able to affect ways of doing international relations and public diplomacy. Furthermore, Nye underlines the importance of commerce as a way of transmitting culture through personal contacts, visits, and deepened exchanges (Nye 2004, 13). Thus scholars of soft power emphasize public diplomacy and recognize that soft power
uses every available instrument to win the hearts and minds of people in different geographies.

Here in this study we must also highlight that in order to win the hearts and minds of foreign publics, we need to include the soft power activities of non-state actors as well. Their ability to influence other people and cultures, and their ability to create desired values and material outcomes, become undeniably useful tools in terms of improving a nation’s attractiveness. In other words, it is not only the states that make direct or indirect influence on foreign publics through the means of soft power. Indeed, it is even more effective when soft power is instrumentalized through non-state actors. For instance, literature on soft power tells us that the main sources include films, television, sports, schools, and international cultural and commercial exchanges. When we look at the capacity of the United States’ soft power, for example, we immediately encounter the main tools of soft power such as “mass media, the film industry, internet, cultural events, mode of life, exchange programs, education, music, literature, sports, fast food, national languages, and public diplomacy” (Gallarotti, 2011, 27). Through these instruments, the US successfully attracts world audiences who believe that the US is the modern world’s cultural and entertainment center. According to a much contested theory of conflict resolution of the Golden Arch, Thomas Friedman came up with the argument that no two countries that had a McDonald’s restaurant would go to war with each other (Luce 2015). The idea in this theory is the assumption that the liberal doctrines shaping the current geopolitical world order would not allow conflict between two nations that believed in the liberal order. This indeed is considered to be a golden opportunity that every nation wants to have in its diplomatic sack.

As argued above, soft power in the end resides in the ability to affect the behaviors of others by influencing their preferences using a variety of policies, actions, and qualities that endear nations to other nations (Rothman 2011). So the essence of the argument here becomes that one nation’s international image and its acceptance in the liberal world order becomes much more visible when the nation is equipped with globally preferred qualities of non-state soft power facilitators, such as multinational corporations, NGOs, high-tech soft engineering and entertainment industries. In this regard, soft power is no longer regarded as a substantial alternative to hard military power, but instead, it is argued that it is a game changer with its mobilizing and persuading power in a liberal and globalized world. However, one should not assume that soft power is the ultimate instrument of the statecraft yielding to a zero-sum game in international world affairs. Instead the more connected world is shaped and reshaped by non-state actors operating on every level of commercial and economic life.
Turkey and its Soft Power Capacity

In the last two decades, Turkey has widened its sphere of influence with domestic and international policies. This mode of transformation is wrought partially by the demands of ongoing globalization and also by domestic dynamics including social and political forces. Before the collapse of the Cold War, Turkey was considered to be the buffer zone between two worlds, the West and the Soviet (Cohen 2009). Turkey remained part of the Western world by participating in many international organizations such as NATO, OECD, Council of Europe and Turkey’s geopolitical orientation with the rest of the world also remained parallel to those of the Western nations and organizations. However, Turkey’s more salient multi-regional connections and its foreign relations truly began in the 2000s. Especially with the rise of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) into power, Turkey has developed political, economic, and strategic ties not only with neighboring regions like the Balkans, Caucasus and the Middle East, but also with more distant geographies like Sub-Saharan Africa, South America and the Far East. During this period, Turkey pushed to transform its international image from being a passive actor on the global stage to being an active and constructive regional and global member. This mindset came with a shift from the previous belief that Turkey is ‘surrounded by three seas but seven enemies’ to a newer one, where Turkey is a developing nation with value-laden international relations and commercial ties with both developing and underdeveloped states.

Turkey’s ties with the developing continent of Africa, for example, began with specific activities (trading, student exchanges, humanitarian aid, etc.) undertaken by civil societies and their niche expertise (Ozkan and Akgun 2010). Civil societies’ influence on the continent was more constructive and guiding, especially on issues where their expertise was needed the most (as in the case of building roads and airports). Turkish state and non-state establishments were the first to introduce food programs in poor states, such as the Humanitarian Relief Foundation (IHH) and state-organized agencies like the Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TIKA), and the Disaster and Emergency Management Presidency (AFAD). In the following years, Turkey opened up new diplomatic missions in the continent and went from being an almost invisible state to the most visible one in the field. The Turkish Prime Minister visited Ethiopia and South Africa in 2005 for the first time in Turkey’s history. Since this visit, Turkey’s relations with most of the continent have increased and Turkey has become a strategic partner with countries in Sub-Saharan Africa in particular. To top this off, Turkish Airlines strengthened relations with the continent by offering direct flights from Istanbul to multiple capitals and major cities.
Besides Turkish Airlines’ presence in many world cities and airports, which we will discuss in the following sections, Turkey’s soft power capabilities increased alongside its million-dollar film and soap opera industries. Via this entertainment sector, Turkey’s visibility around the world increased further. The number of tourists coming to Turkey immediately increased as the number of Turkish soap operas exploded in the world market from Colombia to Somalia. This for sure enhanced the positive image of Turkey in the eyes of other nations and cultures. For instance, the number of tourists who visited Turkey increased from countries where Turkish soap operas were exported the most. Turkish soap operas now are exported to more than 75 countries and viewed by more than 400 million people all around the world (Anaz and Ozcan 2016). For example, the soap opera *Nour’s finale* was viewed by about 85 million people in the Arab world, as experts indicate (Williams 2013). This of course increases Turkey’s visibility on the world stage. It is also a strategic advantage for Turkey in terms of creating a positive image beyond its borders. As mentioned earlier, the more a positive image of Turkey is spread throughout the world, the better off the film-induced tourism industry becomes in Turkey. And that, in turn, will also contribute to Turkey’s soft power capacity.

**National Airlines as an Instrument of Soft Power**

Jonathan McClory rightly underlines the fact that “never before has the ability of a government to attract and engage with international audiences been so important to its prosperity, security and international influence” (McClory 2014). Governments today continuously invest in the aviation industry not only because they want to succeed in the air transportation business but also because they seek to push the limits in creating a national trademark in the air. Ultimately this increases the nation’s prestige and charms the world public wherever the national airline flies. Because everyone knows that the prestige which the airlines bring belongs to the entire nation in the end. Orcun Selcuk in his article on Turkish Airlines notes that when “the airline company’s ranking and visibility increases among the airlines all over the world, it has positive repercussions for its home country not only in the area of politics, but also in the area of commerce” (Selcuk, 2013, p. 180). In this sense, the point to emphasize here is that when a nation’s prestigious airline takes off, it is often understood that the flying aircraft becomes the nation’s flying monument and cultural icon as well. Thus, nations which heavily invest in their national airlines are well aware that a successful airline industry can bring their nation many benefits, not only in terms of a commercial totality but also in regard to image building.
In addition to what is discussed above, we need to point out that it is not only the commerce and politics that matter; a successful national airline should also be considered a global accessibility portal and a geopolitical advantage. We know that strategically located airports in a country can serve as an international connection hub location and a global image-making site for the nation. Presenting itself as one of the biggest airports in the world, Istanbul’s new airport is doubtless a candidate for Turkey’s new image-maker icon with many international destinations. Providing direct flights to most of the world’s airports in less than twelve hours, Turkish Airlines and its new home, the third airport in Istanbul, deserves to be the country’s eyes and wings in the sky. As we see in the Table 1, Turkish Airlines carries millions of transfer passengers via its international flights.

We need to point out here that not only Turkish Airlines aims to help Turkey’s image in the world, but other leading world airlines also work hard to promote their names and international aspirations in the hope that they add value to their nation’s image and reputation worldwide. Qatar Airways and Emirates for instance, present themselves as the eagle eyes of the Gulf and Africa. In addition to their increasing number of flight destinations and improving their service in the air, they also strive to become their nation’s trademark and a useful tool in the soft power capacity of the nation. These airlines therefore not only promote their names as a business trademark but they also promote the image of their country. This tells us

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**TABLE 1**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>2015</th>
<th>2016</th>
<th>Change (%)</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Passengers Carried</td>
<td>61,234,678</td>
<td>62,758,615</td>
<td>2.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Int-to-Int Transfer</td>
<td>18,362,723</td>
<td>20,951,040</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cargo and Mail (Tons)</td>
<td>719,928</td>
<td>876,228</td>
<td>21.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fleet</td>
<td>299</td>
<td>334</td>
<td>11.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of Destinations</td>
<td>284</td>
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*FIGURE 1*

Global aviation traffic worldwide

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* Annual forecast published by IATA

Source: IATA Airline Industry Economic Performance, December 2016

RPK: Revenue Passenger Kilometer

FTK: Freight Tonne Kilometer
that airplanes are not just a simple vehicle of transportation in the sky; they are also flying flags and national pride above the clouds.

**Turkish Airlines and the Geopolitics of Aviation**

As the Republic of Turkey prepares for its hundredth anniversary, Turkish Airlines also sets its goals for the landmark year 2023. With the completion of the new airport in Istanbul, Turkish Airlines aims to be one of the top airlines in the world. Currently sitting among the top ten best airlines in the world, Turkish Airlines sets the goal of serving millions of additional passengers in the years ahead. The third airport itself is designed to meet this goal by targeting to service more than 200 million passengers and a large portion will be handled by Turkey’s top airline.

Additionally, we also noticed that Turkish Airlines’ 2023 targets match with those of Turkey by making Turkish Airlines the nation’s best-known trademark company in the world. Turkey moves forward to be the world’s largest flying fleet with plans to increase its fleet to 450 (currently it is smaller than this number, see Table 2), that will shorten both time and space. By doing this, Turkey wants to take advantage of being the hub connecting East to West and South to North. Turkish Airlines already operates 247 daily flights to international cities with its young and modern fleet.

**TABLE 2**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>As of 31 December 2016</th>
<th>To Be Delivered Between 2017-2023</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Wide Body</strong></td>
<td>87</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Narrow Body</strong></td>
<td>234</td>
<td>169</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Cargo</strong></td>
<td>13</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>334</td>
<td>173</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**TABLE 3**

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As mentioned earlier, Turkey’s is reaching out to the world through operations of other state-associated institutions such as the Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TIKA) and Anatolian Agency (AA). Turkish Airlines supports Turkey’s recent geopolitical initiations.
As Selcuk correctly outlines, Turkish Airlines contributes in this sense to Turkey’s national interests and becomes an integral part of the state’s soft power instrument and an ancillary to Turkey’s foreign policy objectives. Additionally, it aims to establish diplomatic and commercial relations with countries in specific regions (Selcuk 2013). Similar to this, McClory also confirms that “Well-run national carriers can lift global perceptions of their home country, but more broadly, aviation is a great facilitator of soft power, closing distances and connecting people, cultures, companies, ideas, innovation, and opportunity” (McClory 2014). This is exactly what Turkey wants to establish with its large investments in the new airport in Istanbul and the rapid expansion of Turkish Airlines’ fleet for the year 2023, the republic’s first hundredth birthday. Table 4 below clearly demonstrates that Turkish Airlines shares Turkey’s international aspirations and supports the nation’s soft power capacity with its increasing flight routes worldwide.

When we also consider Turkey’s geostrategic location, Turkish Airlines has the potential to become one of the global aviation hubs of the top five airlines listed in the ‘flight connectedness index.’ The top five entries in the ‘flight connectedness index’ are Germany, France, the UK, USA, and Italy/Netherlands respectively. When we look at the soft power index, we also notice similar names including Germany, the UK, USA,
France, and Japan respectively (McClory 2014). This is not to say that the ‘flight connectedness index’ is directly correlated with the soft power index (See Table 5). However, it appears that countries which have the best network of destinations also have the highest soft power capacity. In this context, policy makers are well aware that strengthening national airlines is in the country’s best interest to increase its soft power capacity, especially in the regions where the nation’s image is an expanding phenomenon. This is surely the case for Turkey.

**Turkish Airlines as a Global Brand**

Turkish airlines, since its establishment in 1933, passed through different stages of hard times; first to sustain in the business, then to comply with the demands of the industry. Nowadays, the airline is pushing the limits of the aviation community to become one of the best global brands. Through its enlargement programs and the implementation of other significant investments, Turkish Airlines moved forward by purchasing large-scale aircraft and adding armies of crews from all nationalities around the world. This in return enabled the company to offer even more intercontinental destinations and hundreds of international flights. With the slogan of ‘Widen Your World’, Turkish Airlines lets the world know about its network of international expansion through which world passengers can take part in an enhanced flight experience on board. To borrow the company’s own words on what is offered to their passengers before, during and after the boarding, it is stated that:

These changes include a new catering concept which has recently been introduced to enrich the dining experience with “samovar” and “candle light” features. Turkish Airlines continues to utilize its “Flying Chefs” on long flights; and offer a cabin entertainment system which includes nearly 400 films and one thousand CD albums, as well as radio and news channels. Its “Invest On Board” digital platform enables its guests to encounter, in flight, fascinating and enterprising ideas presented by important business figures from around the world; plus live TV, CIP Lounges which bring a unique level of comfort and ease to its passengers before and after their flights. All of these changes display the desire of Turkish Airlines to provide an unmatched travel experience (Turkish Airlines, 2013).

In order to enlarge its reputation, Turkish Airlines opens its doors to well-known world celebrities like the brand ambassadors and basketball player Kobe Bryant, footballer Lionel Messi, March of the Penguins narrator Morgan Freeman, and magician Zach King. Having these legends on board, Turkish Airlines truly strives to become one of the Ivy League airlines. After the release of the “Kobe vs. Messi: Shootout” commercial
with these legends on board, the visibility of Turkish Airlines skyrocketed. Soon after the commercial was put online, it became an instant hit, gathering the attention of millions around the world. It became the most viewed commercial on YouTube. According to the company’s statement, “approximately 200 people took part in shooting the “Kobe vs. Messi: Shootout” commercial and it has been broadcast in 170 countries and translated into over 20 different languages, and it is estimated to be viewed more than 105 million times” (Turkish Airlines 2013).

Recently Turkish Airlines’ football sponsorships have also increased. Its most widely-known sponsorship was the 2016 European Football Championship, where it was the first airline to act as a sponsor. Turkish Airlines’ visibility in the world’s second biggest sporting event and the biggest in Europe propelled them beyond what an ordinary commercial advertisement could. However, it is important to note here that this enormous commercial setup did not only improve Turkish Airlines’ global branding in the aviation community but also immeasurably increased Turkey’s positive image worldwide. As its visibility throughout the world improved, Turkish Airlines turned its reputation into numbers by attracting more passengers, thus making Turkey the hot new destination for tourists. Undoubtedly, Turkish Airlines’ global branding and worldwide visibility helped to increase Turkey’s soft power capability as the hub for international connections and tourism destinations.

Additionally, one of the most positive bits of media attention came when a woman named Nafi Diaby gave birth mid-flight (See Figure 2). Soon after Turkish Airlines’ plane TK-538 Boeing 777 took off from Guinea’s capital, Conakry, a 28-weeks- pregnant woman began to have contractions. When the development was reported to the cabin crew, trained for all kinds of circumstances, they rushed to help the woman give birth to a baby girl at 42 thousand feet. Minutes later, there was a tired mother with a new baby but both were healthy and happy. Crew members and passengers captured the moment and shared it on social media (Slawson 2017). Later the plane landed in Burkina Faso’s capital Ouagadougou to allow further health checks on both the mother and the baby. After the incident became worldwide news via conventional and the social media, in a statement, Turkish Airlines’ management announced that the company decided to pay the baby’s (named Kadiju) education until she finishes college and on her wish, the company will give her a position in the firm (Airkule 2017).

The news mentioned above may seem to be ordinary news in our modern world, but its impact on the people of developing nations is more significant. The way the crew handled the birth and then the company following up with Kadiju’s health and future well-being added value to its
international image and credibility. Many social media comments on the news show that Turkish Airlines’ approach to its passengers was uplifting for the company. Turkish Airlines was very proud with such positive and encouraging news, especially in the years of the downward trend in the aviation business.

**Conclusion**

With its well-established flight route to the seven continents and growing ground and onboard services, Turkish Airlines is marking a new epoch in the aviation business. Despite the nature of this highly competitive market, Turkish Airlines aims high and is moving forward complying with its vision. While securing Turkey’s support at hand, Turkish Airlines is striving hard to expand both its ground and onboard services. It offers one of the largest and best lounge services at the Istanbul Ataturk Airport (after Doha, Istanbul came second for the best lounges in the world in 2016) (Skytrax 2016), and serves millions of international transfer passengers from one continent to another. Aligning with Turkey’s political, economic and cultural openings in Africa, the Far East and South
America, Turkish Airlines is moving forward and carries travelers from one corner of the world to the other. Again, concomitant with Turkey’s easing of visa regulations and proactive foreign policy from 2000 onward, the country, especially Istanbul, is becoming a key hub of international connections and a superb tourist destination that is also one of the most visited cities in the world.

Although 51 percent of the company’s shares belongs to public shareholders, the Turkish state still continues to be the largest and managing partner of the firm with its 49 percent sharehold. Since the management part of the company is strictly handled by the state, Turkish Airlines carries on its vision and mission for the future, coordinated and paralleled with those of the state. This particularity of the company helps them undertake risky investments and ambitious steps in the aviation market. Knowing that Turkish people and the state are behind the nation’s proud flying fleet, Turkish Airlines is advancing to meet and exceed demands of the airline industry. Despite the terrible terror incidents of 2015 in Turkey, Turkish Airlines advanced its growing agenda. To date, its determination to move forward has not disappointed the airline. As Turkish Airlines continues being one of the finest airlines in the world, this means that Turkey’s soft power capability can also be stretched to the limits of the map where the wings of Turkish Airlines touch.

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