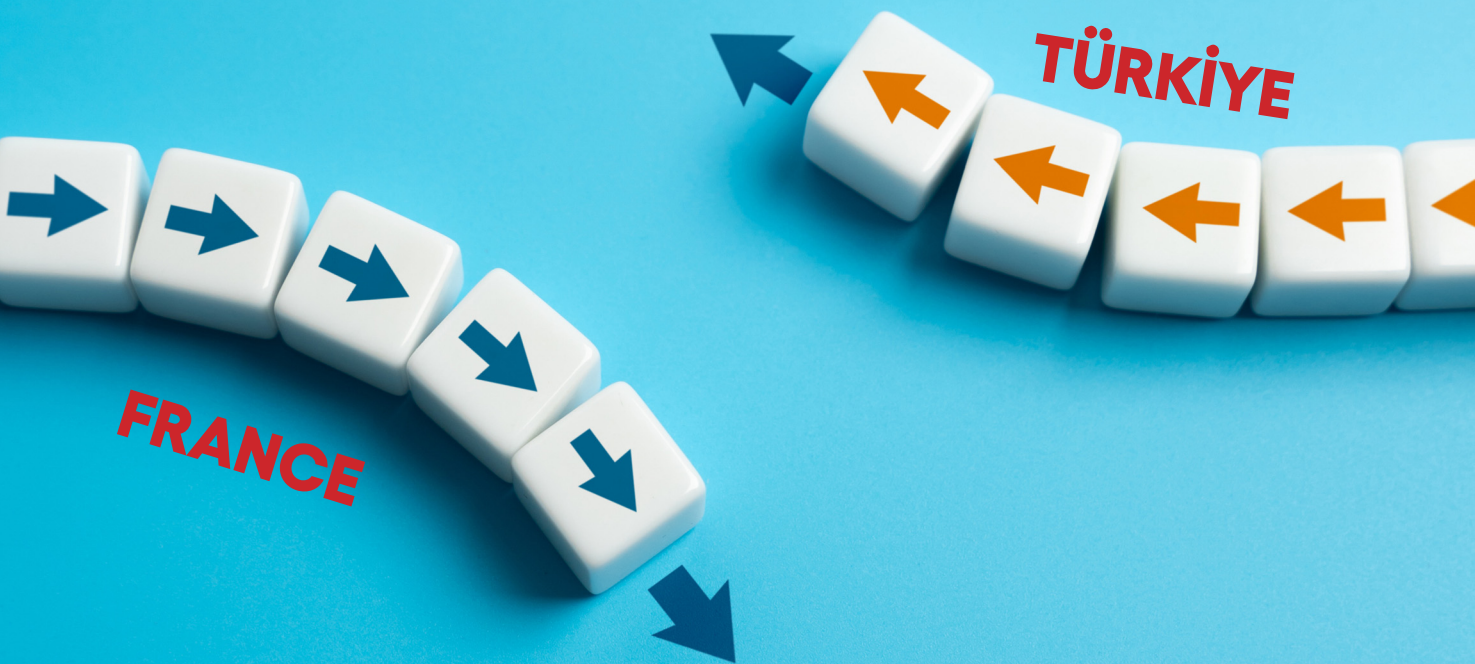


FRENCH-TURKISH RELATIONS: BETWEEN POLITICAL DISAGREEMENTS AND NECESSARY COOPERATION

French-Turkish relations are characterized by the absence of long-term conflicts. Indeed, historically, the two countries have not often been opposed to each other. The periods of alliance between them have been longer and more important than the periods of war.

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Since the beginning of the 2020 decade, it seems that France and Türkiye are trying to improve their bilateral relations. In a global geopolitical context that is evolving quickly, both countries have a mutual interest in cooperation. Historically, there have been no particularly serious conflicts between France and Türkiye. Over the past few decades, the two countries have certainly experienced tensions and political crises that have damaged their bilateral relationship. However, these problems are not linked to their fundamental interests, but rather to political divergences which could be solved. If Paris and

Ankara successfully make progress in solving these issues, they can then try to agree on better economic, political, and perhaps even longer-term strategic cooperation.

1. Old bilateral relations that have only recently deteriorated

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The periods of alliance between them have been longer and more important than the periods of war. However, there has been a real deterioration in their relationship since the 1970s, but the causes of this deterioration are political, and do not concern their fundamental interests.

1.1. No historical conflict between France and Türkiye

Since the alliance between François the 1st and Kanuni Süleyman in the early 16th century, Franco-Turkish relations have generally been cooperative. Throughout the 17th and 18th centuries, the Kingdom of France and the Ottoman Empire faced a common enemy, the Empire of Austria, and cultivated good diplomatic relations with each other. When the French Revolution put an end to the monarchy, the Ottoman Empire was one of the few European powers to maintain relations with revolutionary France.¹

However, things became more complicated in the 19th century, with the start of the "Question d'Orient" [Eastern Question]: observing the decline of Ottoman Empire, France was tempted, like other European powers, to take advantage of its weakening and seize its territories. Napoleon Bonaparte's expedition to Egypt in 1798 opened the first serious crisis between the two countries. However, the French emperor subsequently tried to improve relations with Ottomans. But the more the Ottoman Empire lost control of its possessions, the more France took the opportunity to seize them, for example Algeria in 1830, or Tunisia in 1881. France also supported Greece during its war of independence (1821-1829). However, against Russia, France and the UK joined forces with Ottoman Empire during the Crimean War (1853-1856). Last but not least, Türkiye's support for Germany in the First World War led to direct confrontations with France. After the Moudros armistice, France occupied Syria and southeastern Anatolia, before retreating when faced with nationalist troops and reaching an agreement with Mustafa Kemal (1921). In 1938-1939, new tensions arose between France and Türkiye over the

province of Hatay, until France granted it independence, allowing Türkiye to annex it.²

Nevertheless, even in times of crisis and war, France and Türkiye were not direct enemies. Bonaparte's Egyptian expedition targeted the British, not the Ottomans. Türkiye's alliance with Germany in 1914 was directed primarily against Russia, not France. The two countries competed for control of the Arab world, but not for their vital interests. There was no major case of slaughter, occupation or colonialism between them. This is why, while the history of France's relations with Germany or Algeria, or of Türkiye's relations with Russia, Greece or Armenia, may be described as complex and painful, this is not the case for the history of French-Turkish relations.

In the 1960s, relations between France and the Republic of Türkiye were particularly good. President Charles de Gaulle saw Türkiye as an indispensable partner for guarding Europe's eastern border. In 1963, he supported the Ankara Agreement between Türkiye and the European Economic Community (EEC). Unlike Charles de Gaulle's France, Türkiye did not wish to leave NATO's Integrated Command. But, like France, it also aspired to greater autonomy from its American ally. This situation led to a Franco-Turkish rapprochement on political, diplomatic, economic and cultural levels.³

1.2. A gradual deterioration in bilateral relations from the 1970s onwards

Several issues contributed to the deterioration of relations between France and Türkiye from 1970 onwards. However, it should be noted that these were generally political issues, and did not concern the vital interests of either country.

The first point of disagreement was about relations with Greece. Elected president in 1974, Valéry Giscard d'Estaing, unlike his predecessors, felt closer to Greece than to Türkiye. As a result, France criticized Türkiye's position on the Cyprus issue, particularly its military operation in the north of the island. Since then, and to this day, France refuses to recognize the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus, and calls for the reunification of the island. However, this has never been a major topic of French foreign policy.⁴

The second point of disagreement concerned human rights. The military coups in Türkiye, especially the one in 1980, were followed by harsh repression that led many political activists to flee to Europe, especially France.

Active in the French political debate, these activists, both left-wing and pro-Kurdish, insisted strongly on the issue of human rights. From this period onwards, France began to take an increasingly critical stance towards Türkiye, particularly with regard to political repression. This criticism was not well received in Türkiye, since the successive Turkish governments perceived it as an interference in their internal affairs.⁵

Finally, the rise of Armenian revendications in France also had an impact on bilateral relations from the 1970s onwards. Very active militant groups called for the massacres against Armenians of 1915 to be recognized as “genocide”, and actively lobbied French political and intellectual elites to this end. This activism led France to officially recognize the violence as “genocide” in 2001, a position that Türkiye refutes.⁶ However, in 2012, France’s Constitutional Council censured a law that aimed to prohibit anyone from contesting this term. The Armenian issue remains a source of tension between France and Türkiye.

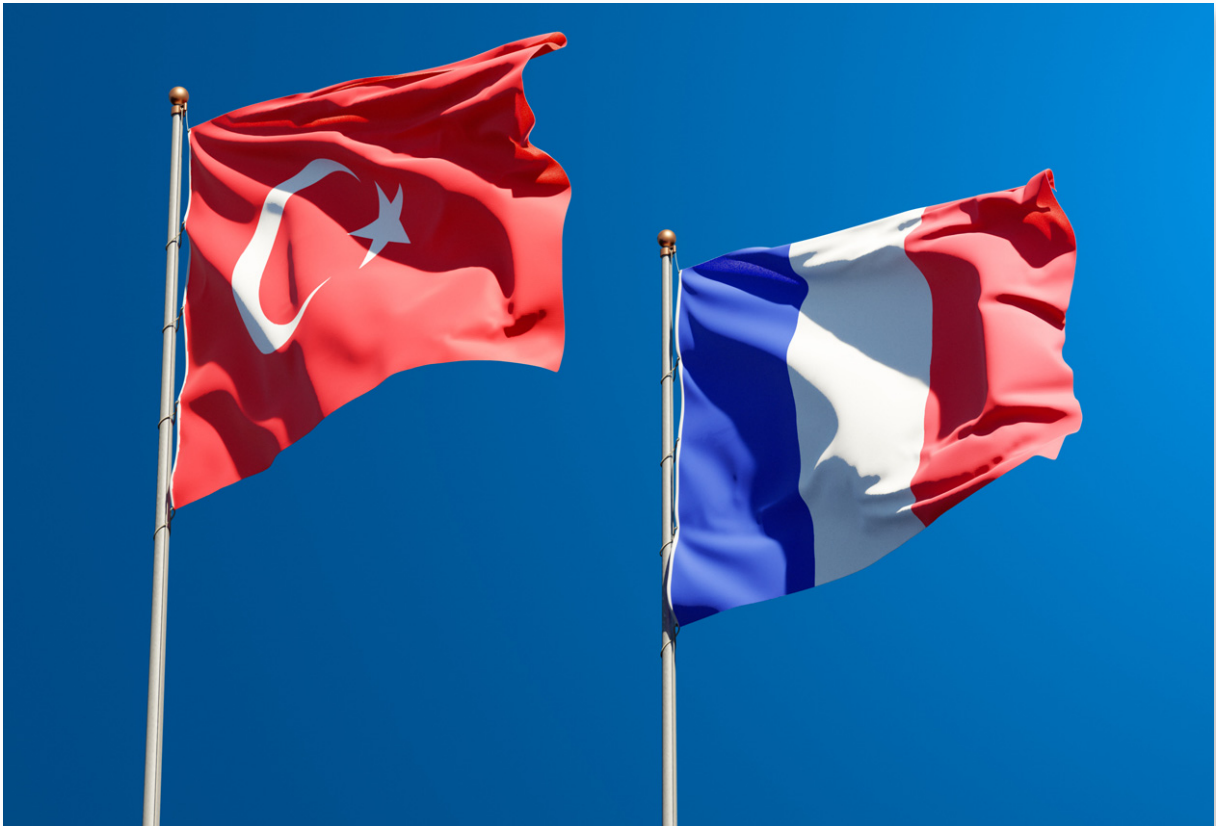
It is clear, however, that none of these issues concern direct geopolitical interests between the two countries. They are rather linked to political disagreements, which can evolve depending on the context. It should be added, on the other hand, that more serious geopolitical

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disagreements have arisen between France and Türkiye in recent years, even if bilateral relations remain important.

2. Current state of bilateral relations: crisis and disagreements

French-Turkish relations are currently troubled, as both countries have tended to disagree on several key geopolitical issues. Moreover, these tensions have been used by politicians in both countries for domestic political purposes. However, this does not prevent economic cooperation and significant cultural links.



2.1. Interdependence between domestic and foreign policy and its negative impact on bilateral relations

Since the 2000s, political life in both France and Türkiye has been characterized by the emergence of strong executive powers, built around a charismatic leader. In both France and Türkiye, the President of the Republic, the key figure of the political system, is also the head of strategic and diplomatic policy. This president may therefore be tempted to use foreign policy as an instrument to reinforce his image among public opinion. This trend can lead to clashes with countries designated as a threat or as hostile.

In France, President Nicolas Sarkozy (2007-2012) used the reluctance of part of the electorate to Türkiye's admission to the European Union to his political ends. Despite the fact that accession negotiations had begun in 2005, he made repeated statements hostile to Türkiye's candidacy. Even though he did not break off the adhesion negotiations, this reluctance on the part of France weakened the dialogue between Turks and Europeans, and gave Turks a feeling of being rejected.⁷ More recently, President Erdoğan and President Macron have engaged in several verbal confrontations. It seems that this face-off has allowed each of them to present themselves as "strong men", standing up against a country portrayed in a negative light. In Türkiye, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan acted as defender of France's Muslims, accusing France of Islamophobia; he also regularly criticized French action in Africa and the Middle East as being colonialist.⁸ In France, Emmanuel Macron referred to Türkiye as a strategic threat to Europeans.⁹ These criticisms were essentially rhetorical. They did not always indicate a situation of open hostility between the two countries. But they obviously contributed to a deterioration in bilateral relations.

2.2. Fields of confrontation in the Mediterranean and in Africa

There are certainly many areas of geopolitical disagreement between France and Türkiye in recent years. The Arab revolutions, civil wars in Syria and Libya, and coups d'états in Africa, have led to instability in the Mediterranean, Middle East and African zones. Faced with this instability, France and Türkiye have often taken

different sides, which has led them to come face to face, sometimes through allies.

In Syria, France and Türkiye both initially supported rebels hostile to Bashar al-Assad. However, with the emergence of jihadist groups and terrorist attacks on its territory, France changed its strategy. It started supporting the Kurdish YPG militia. Türkiye, however, considers these militias to be a subsidiary of the PKK, and therefore a terrorist and hostile movement. In Libya, Türkiye supported Sayez el-Sarraj's National Government of Union (2016-2021) and accused France of supporting Marshal Khalifa Haftar, who was fighting him. Lastly, since 2017, a form of personal rivalry has led President Emmanuel Macron (since 2017) and President Tayyip Erdoğan (since 2014) to make highly negative comments about each other. In autumn 2019, Emmanuel Macron said that NATO was "brain dead"; among other elements, he evoked Türkiye's actions, which he said were not coordinated with the other member states. President Erdoğan advised him to worry about his own brain health.¹⁰ On 10 June 2020, there was a maritime incident between the Turkish and French navies off the coast of Libya. France accused a Turkish frigate of illuminating its corvette Le Courbet and considered this to be a hostile act.¹¹ All these events led French strategic and political circles to regard Türkiye as a potential threat to French interests, especially in Mediterranean.¹² This situation lasted until at least 2021. There is also a form of rivalry between France and Türkiye in Africa. The Turkish media are generally highly critical of French actions in Africa, which is seen as neo-colonialist.¹³ In several countries where France has lost influence (Mali, Niger...), Türkiye is trying to deploy its cultural diplomacy. It should be noted, however, that unlike the Mediterranean, sub-Saharan Africa is not an area where the French and Turks are in open conflict.

2.3. Armenian-Azerbaijan issue and its impact on bilateral relations

As mentioned above, the Armenian question was a dividing issue between France and Türkiye. On 23 January 2012, the adoption of a law criminalizing the negation of Armenian genocide was strongly criticized by Türkiye; important protests were organized by Turkish diaspora in France.¹⁴ Even if the French Constitutional Court declared the law unconstitutional and removed it in February, this affair was perceived by Türkiye as a direct act of hostility toward it. It must be noted that at this occasion, Azerbaijan also wished France to leave the co-presidency of the Minsk Group, considering it has lost its neutrality.¹⁵ However, contrary to popular belief, Türkiye's actions in the South Caucasus are not necessarily always

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viewed unfavorably by France. During the Armenian-Azerbaijani War of 2020, many French politicians expressed their solidarity with Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh. Media coverage of the Turkish actions was generally very critical. The most significant political action was the Senate's resolution of 25 November 2020 calling on the government to recognise the "Republic of Nagorno-Karabakh" as an independent republic. But even if Emmanuel Macron publicly stated that Türkiye's stance was "ill-considered" and "dangerous"¹⁶, in November 2020, he also reiterated that the Nagorno-Karabakh was part of Azerbaijani territory¹⁷, and he refused the adoption of sanctions against Baku.¹⁸

But it must be precised that France perceived Türkiye also as a moderating factor, capable of bringing Armenia and Azerbaijan to a stable peace. There is currently no significant diplomatic cooperation between France and Türkiye on this subject and France, through the delivery of weapons to Armenia, still shows a certain support for Yerevan. However, the attitude of the French diplomatic corps and government to Turkish actions in relation to

the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict is now more distant, and open to evolution. The idea that Türkiye could also encourage Azerbaijan and president Aliyev to develop a more comprehensive and realistic approach toward Armenia is also expressed in diplomatic circles.¹⁹ To sum up, France wants to appear as a supporter and protector of Armenia, but does not wish to directly oppose Türkiye's actions in the Caucasus.

2.4. Maintaining close economic and cultural ties

Despite political crises, economic relations between France and Türkiye remain strong. Bilateral trade between France and Türkiye has steadily developed over the 2010 decade, growing from 11 billion € in 2008 to 14 billion € in 2017, and is still around 13,5 billion € in 2023. This year, Türkiye was France's 11th economic partner²⁰, while France was Türkiye's 7th economic partner.²¹ When President Erdoğan traveled to France in 2018, he insisted on the target of increasing bilateral exchanges between the two countries. Moreover, Türkiye is attractive to

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French entrepreneurs and investors. It represents a large market with a population of more than 80 million, and it is a country with an important growth. French also appreciate the high level of quality of the workforce, especially of the high executive, the availability of many basic and semi-finished products, and the very strong network of dynamic small and medium-sized firms.²²

Cultural relations between France and Türkiye are also relatively rich. The French language is present in Türkiye; since the middle of the 20th century, for many years it is far less important than English, but it continues to be taught. There are numerous French-language schools and institutes of higher education, such as the high schools of Galatasaray, Saint-Benoît or Notre-Dame de Sion in Istanbul, or Tevfik Fikret Highschools in Ankara and İzmir.²³ Cultural cooperation links are also established between municipalities, for example between the Paris and Istanbul City Councils. Travels by French artists to Türkiye and Turkish artists to France are frequent, facilitating contact between the two peoples.

3. Perspective of rapprochement and cooperation

The global environment created by Russia's aggression against Ukraine, the renewed Israeli-Palestinian crisis, Donald Trump's election and the regime change in Syria, seems favorable to increased cooperation between France and Türkiye.

3.1. Common concern regarding the evolution of global geopolitics

Paris and Ankara share a similar analysis of these most recent crises. Concerning the war in Ukraine, both countries supported the Ukrainian state and its territorial integrity, but wished to keep dialogue with Russia open. As for the crisis in Gaza, Türkiye is much more critical of Israel than France. However, both countries share the same official demands: first a ceasefire, and then a political solution based on two states, a Palestinian and an Israeli

one. The election of Donald Trump and the possibility of a Russian victory in Ukraine have worried France and Türkiye. Faced with the possibility of Washington and Moscow sharing their spheres of influence, Europeans and Turks have an interest in cooperating.²⁴ Europe is seeking strategic autonomy, and Türkiye does not wish to stand alone against Russia in the Black Sea. Finally, the regime change in Syria could encourage cooperation. France is keen to renew ties with Syria, and Türkiye could play a mediating role.

3.2. Perspective in resolving bilateral conflicts

In the context of this global transformation, it is interesting to note that France and Türkiye seem able to work out their differences on many traditionally contentious issues. The governments of both countries actually seem inclined to want this development to occur. In the crisis between France and Algeria since 2024, Türkiye has been careful not to openly side with Algiers, despite its recurrent criticism of French "neo-colonialism". Reciprocally, after the arrest of Istanbul mayor Ekrem İmamoğlu in March 2025, the French government issued only light criticism of Türkiye. While this attitude has been questioned by the Turkish opposition, it shows that France wishes to avoid further accusations of interference in Türkiye's internal affairs.

In Libya and Syria, national reconciliation processes can help to reduce tensions between the various factions involved, and thus lead to a new dialogue between Turks and French. The situation is similar in the South Caucasus: the signing of a peace agreement between Armenia and Azerbaijan could open up a new era of cooperation, in which France and Türkiye would find common interests. Finally, ongoing negotiations between Türkiye and Greece suggest that the period of tension and confrontation of 2019-2020 will not be repeated. Of course, France and Türkiye may remain rivals in specific geopolitical arenas, such as sub-Saharan Africa, but the areas of direct confrontation between them will tend to diminish.

3.3. An important potential for cooperation

In this fast-changing global context, Franco-Turkish cooperation is a real possibility in the coming years, with some more specific areas of application. There are plenty of opportunities for economic cooperation. A major topic of discussion between France and Türkiye could be the modernization of the Türkiye- EU Customs Union. This trade framework, in existence since 1995, is considered outdated, and firms in both countries would like to see it

modernized.²⁵ If successful, this could boost trade between the Turkish and French economies. It should be noted, however, that Türkiye's long-standing economic crisis could slow down the modernization process.

In terms of geopolitical stability in the Mediterranean and South Caucasus, France and Türkiye can also find interesting areas of cooperation. On the major crises currently affecting the international scene, France and Türkiye could make their positions heard. In particular, both countries have an interest in seeing peace in Ukraine accompanied by very solid security guarantees for Ukrainians. Unlike the United States, the Turks and the French are geographically close to this geopolitical area. They therefore know it well and can propose solutions to ensure peace is maintained. Common action between France and Türkiye (which could include other European countries such as Italy and Germany) could both reassure Ukraine and enable long-term dialogue with Russia. In Middle East, France wants stabilization in Lebanon and the renewal of diplomatic relations with Syria. For both these objectives, Türkiye's support is important. The weakening of Hezbollah has diminished Iranian influence in Lebanon, opening the way for players close to Ankara.²⁶ In Syria, the new regime has good relations with Türkiye. France could therefore consider participating

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economically in the reconstruction of this region, in exchange for stability ensured by Ankara and its partners.

The most ambitious area, but also probably the most difficult to achieve, is cooperation on strategic issues in the framework of European defense. It is difficult to imagine advanced cooperation in this highly sensitive area in the short term. However, at the beginning of 2025, a project to sell French air-to-air missiles to Türkiye was made public.²⁷ The existence of this project indicates that arms cooperation is not unthinkable. Türkiye already cooperates on defense and weapons with Poland, for example.²⁸ France sees Poland as a pillar of a potential common European defense. As part of the European Union's strategic autonomy, France could consider Türkiye, like the UK, as privileged defense partners.



4. Conclusion

Historically marked by cooperation, relations between France and Türkiye are not structurally conflictual. The recent tensions and crises between the two countries are mainly due to political disagreements.

These disagreements can be solved. This is becoming increasingly important in an insecure world where Turks, French and Europeans, sharing the same geographical area, have an interest in strengthening their cooperation.

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