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Franco-Turkish Competition Ascendant

by [Soner Cagaptay](#)

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Articles & Testimony

Given their sharply diverging views on conflict zones, secularism, and regional spheres of influence, the two states are swiftly becoming NATO's next diplomatic hotspot.

Recent press reports according to which Paris claimed the Turkish navy “illuminated” a French vessel off the coast of Libya in June 2020 suggest that the flashpoint to watch inside the NATO alliance is not Turkey vs. U.S., but Ankara vs. Paris. Turkish-French ties date to the 16th century, when Ottoman Sultan Suleyman I and French King Francois I forged an alliance in 1536. France is Turkey’s oldest European friend, but the bilateral relationship has seen its ups and downs, most recently in Syria. In fact today, Turkey and France are locked in a deepening rivalry, centred on issues related to the Syrian and Libyan civil wars, the evolving East Mediterranean strategic environment, and last but not least French President Emmanuel Macron’s and Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdogan’s opposing views on regional affairs.

Following the rise of ISIS, France built strong ties with the Kurdish People’s Protection Forces (YPG) in Syria in order to counter the jihadist threat emanating from that country. The YPG is the Syrian branch of the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), designated as a terrorist entity by Ankara and NATO member states, including Paris, and therefore the French-YPG relationship annoys Ankara greatly. What is more, recent Turkish incursions into Syria to undermine the YPG have upset Paris, which opposes these Turkish moves because they have forced the YPG to divert some forces away from combatting ISIS. Ankara is annoyed that Paris wants it to focus on the ISIS threat, while not helping Turkey counter the threat from the PKK family in Syria. To Ankara’s further dismay, among Turkey’s key NATO allies Paris now has the strongest and most publicly visible ties to the YPG in Syria.

Differences in Libya's civil war have added to tensions between the two countries. When Libya descended into civil war in 2014, Erdogan threw his support behind—at the time—the mainly political Islamist factions in Tripoli's western-based "Dawn Coalition," which opposed the "Dignity Coalition" led by General Khalifa Haftar in the east, also known as the Libyan National Army (LNA).

EGYPTIAN AND EMIRATI SUPPORT TO HAFTAR

Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi and his ally, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), worried about the ascent of political Islam in Libya next door to Egypt and, eager to undermine Erdogan, were quick to assist Haftar's forces. Turkey has sought to counter these moves by providing weapons, including drones, to Libya's Tripoli-based and internationally recognized government, also known as the Government of National Accord (GNA). Ankara's Libya policy has a primary driver: Turkey wants to collect Gadhafi-era debt in Libya—totalling billions of dollars—and have access to new and lucrative construction contracts in that war-torn but oil-rich country.

Enter France, which, too, wants to take a large slice of this cake. Accordingly, vying for money, contracts, and influence (Turkey is reportedly building a military base in Libya), Ankara and Paris have been supporting opposing sides. However, Ankara's success on the battlefield in Libya, pushing Haftar's forces away from Tripoli by militarily supporting GNA, has upset Paris. In return, France has decided to consolidate its partnership in Libya with Turkey's regional opponents: Egypt and the UAE.

Hostility between Turkish president Erdogan and his Egyptian homologue Abdel Fattah el-Sisi has provided France with an entryway into Libya. To put it simply, Erdogan wants to humiliate Sisi in Libya, and Sisi Erdogan. This is because these two presidents are one another's mirror-image nemeses: Erdogan is the political Islamist who has locked up secularist generals, and Sisi is the secularist (if pious) general who has locked up political Islamists.

What is more, in Libya, Erdogan also wants to undermine Ankara's other Middle East nemesis, the UAE, which supports Sisi and Haftar alike, and often plays a key role in supporting anti-Turkish opposition in the U.S. Capitol and around the world. The Emirati and Egyptian positions in Libya have solidified the historically strong Franco-UAE ties and Franco-Egyptian ties around a new anti-Turkish axis in Libya. Recently, Franco-Turkish competition has moved next door into the East Mediterranean, taking advantage of the new strategic environment in this part of the Mediterranean Sea lying between Libya and Turkey.

MOUNTING REGIONAL OPPOSITION TO ANKARA

Since the rupture of Turkish-Israeli ties in 2010 and following Erdogan's regional policy miscalculations during the Arab uprisings, especially regarding Egypt, Turkey has found itself increasingly isolated in the East Mediterranean. Accordingly, Ankara now faces an emerging coalition of old and new adversaries across the East Mediterranean, mainly Cyprus, Egypt, Greece, and Israel. Given its cool-to-hostile relations with these states, Ankara is alarmed by the rate at which they have come together in strategic cooperation, including joint diplomatic, energy, and military initiatives. Soon after coming to power, for example, Sisi opened talks with Greece to delineate their maritime economic areas. He then held a three-way summit in November 2014 to promote a deal for supplying natural gas to Egypt from undersea fields off the coast of Cyprus. Cairo also hosted the inaugural meeting of the East Mediterranean Gas Forum in January 2019, notably excluding Turkey.

This has only boosted Ankara's Libya pivot in favour of the Tripoli government. In November 2019, Ankara forged a new maritime agreement with GNA in part to counter such cooperation. The accord established a virtual maritime axis between Dalaman on Turkey's southwest coast and Darnah on Libya's northeast coast (far from GNA's practical area of control). In Erdogan's view, drawing this line will allow him to cut into the emerging Cypriot-Egyptian-Greek-Israeli maritime bloc, while simultaneously pushing back against Egypt and the UAE's pressure on Tripoli.

FRANCO-GREEK COOPERATION

France has responded by throwing military support behind Greece, and also partnering with European Union (EU) members Cyprus and Greece to legislate sanctions against Ankara in Brussels. Recently, tensions have flared up between Ankara and Athens over Kastellorizo/Meis, a tiny Greek island that lies a stone throw away from the Turkish coast. If it were to have the continental shelf fully claimed for it by Greece, Kastellorizo/Meis would cut across the virtual maritime Dalaman-Darnah axis that connects Turkey to Libya. For the time being, these tensions have subsided thanks to German and NATO mediation, and I do not expect NATO allies Greece and Turkey to go to war.

Similarly, I do not anticipate NATO allies France and Turkey entering into conflict. I do, however, believe that Ankara and Paris will continue to compete for power and influence around the Mediterranean Sea. The return of great power competition to the Mediterranean Sea will drive Franco-Turkish rivalry. Paris, which has often viewed the sea's southern basin, especially the Maghreb, as its sphere of influence since it wrested Algeria from the Ottomans in 1830, is simply annoyed by Erdogan's forays into this area, starting most importantly with Libya.

To add to this rivalry, the two countries also have opposing views of regional governance. Whereas Ataturk's Turkey was the epitome of French style secularism that envisions keeping religion out of politics, Erdogan's embrace of political Islam is the antipode to it—and Paris fears Turkey spreading this style of politics regionally from Syria to Libya to the rest of North Africa.

Macron is not likely to be quiet if Erdogan targets him or Paris. Since 2015, the latter has increasingly won elections and maintained his popularity on a nativist platform that “Turkey is under attack from the West.” Lately, this strategy has failed to work because the U.S. and many European countries refuse to play into his game—France is an exception. This is because France has embraced a policy of shaming and blaming Erdogan for his democratic transgressions at home and foreign policy endeavours, unlike for instance Germany in the EU, which often settles its differences with Ankara behind closed doors.

SUMMARY

In June 2020 Macron did not hold back from accusing Turkey and Erdogan of “playing a dangerous game” in the Eastern Mediterranean and Libya, and he has continued to tell Turkey that there is no chance of Ankara joining the EU. Accordingly, I believe that Macron will continue to criticize Erdogan, and that France will seek wide EU sanctions against Turkey, while perhaps practically not a week will go by that Turkish officials will not ridicule the French president or attack Paris. What is more, Erdogan will use Macron and France as the punching bags of his rumoured early election campaign in Turkey in 2021. It is unlikely that France and Turkey will fight, but their relationship will be NATO's next hot spot.

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