



France vs. Turkey in the EastMed

A Geopolitical Rivalry between a "Keeper" of the Old Order and a Challenging Emergent Power

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► Key Takeaways

- The Franco-Turkish standoff in the Eastern Mediterranean is a geopolitical contest for power that plays out on multiple fronts: Libya, Syria, Lebanon.
- Ankara's expansive understanding of national sovereignty and its hegemonic aspirations in the EastMed is at odds with France's vision of the Mediterranean and its definition of its interests in the region.
- The recent gas discoveries in the EastMed have played a key role in pushing Ankara into a confrontational policy.
- What started as a personal animosity between Macron and Erdogan is gradually turning into a major geopolitical rivalry, where France acts as defender of the old regional order and Turkey as a major disrupter and challenger.

INTRODUCTION¹

In recent months, Turkish-French relations have come under the spotlight as French President Emmanuel Macron and his Turkish counterpart Recep Tayyip Erdogan engaged in a war of words. As Macron championed a campaign to defend France’s secular values against radical Islam following the beheading of a schoolteacher by an Islamist terrorist, Erdogan decried the French president’s lack of acceptance of freedom of religion and suggested that he needed a “mental health check-up”. The backdrop of the verbal altercations between the two leaders is an ongoing geopolitical rivalry opposing Paris and Ankara that is playing out in the Eastern Mediterranean: from Syria and Lebanon to Libya, passing through Cyprus and Greece, France and Turkey are at loggerheads over a range of issues, including maritime rights.

A sharp diagnosis of the Franco-Turkish crisis is essential if efforts for de-escalation of tensions are to be successful. The Franco-Turkish standoff is first and foremost a geopolitical contest for influence in the EastMed area. It must be understood in light of Turkey’s rise as an emergent power in quest for geostrategic autonomy and France’s unease with Ankara’s growing assertiveness in a region that Paris traditionally views as part of its sphere of influence. The crisis is aggravated by two developments: 1) the power void created by the United States’ relative retreat from the region, a void that has set off a struggle for influence that pits traditional powers against emergent powers; and 2) the fading away of Turkey’s EU horizon, which has made Ankara less cooperative and pushed it into a policy of disruption.

MAVI VATAN (“BLUE HOMELAND”) VS. PAX MEDITERRANEA: TURKEY’S AND FRANCE’S COMPETING PROJECTS IN THE EASTMED

Lying at the core of the Franco-Turkish tensions is the maritime dispute between Turkey, Greece, and Cyprus over the delimitation of maritime boundaries and exclusive economic zones (EEZ), where France has strongly backed Greece’s position at Ankara’s discontent. When Ankara launched drilling operations in the northeast of Cyprus within Cypriot territorial waters, French President Emmanuel Macron decried an “unacceptable” Turkish conduct in the Eastern Mediterranean and called Europe to form a united front in addressing Turkey’s “aggressive” behavior.

1. The Centre for Applied Turkey Studies (CATS) at Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik (SWP) in Berlin is funded by Stiftung Mercator and the Federal Foreign Office. CATS is the curator of CATS Network, an international network of think tanks and research institutions working on Turkey. This publication was produced as part of the project “The Search for Franco-German Consensus on the Eastern Mediterranean: The Paris/Ankara Row and its Consequences for the EU” which is a project of CATS Network.

The ideological backbone of Turkey’s confrontational policy in the EastMed is to be found in the “Blue Homeland” doctrine (*Mavi Vatan*), outlined by Admiral Cem Gürdeniz in 2006 and refined recently to the level of state doctrine by former Chief of Staff of the Turkish Navy Admiral Cihat Yayci. In a nutshell, the “Blue Homeland” doctrine means an expanded vision of Turkey’s maritime boundaries to encompass an extensive area of 462,000 square meters, a determination to defend these projected borders through coercive diplomacy and military means, and a repositioning of the country as a maritime power. The doctrine is a reflection of Turkey’s nationalist turn and the country’s search for geostrategic autonomy and energy security through access to hydrocarbon resources.

Ankara’s expansive understanding of national sovereignty and its hegemonic aspirations in the EastMed is at odds with France’s vision of the Mediterranean and its definition of its interests in the region. French President Emmanuel Macron has the ambition to restore France’s power and leadership over the Mediterranean, an area that Paris considers as part of its traditional sphere of influence. In the spirit of his predecessors’ projects for the southern European neighborhood (Chirac’s Barcelona Process, and Sarkozy’s Union for the Mediterranean), President Macron wishes to set a *Pax Mediterranea*, a regional Mediterranean order built around political cooperation and that gravitates around Paris. An aide of President Macron asserts that the latter wishes that a restoration of France’s leadership over the Mediterranean be part of his legacy.²

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In addition, being an advocate of a reinvigorated Europe based on increased internal solidarity among Member States, Macron outwardly backed Greece and Cyprus in their dispute with Turkey over the delimitation of maritime boundaries. Seen from Ankara, France’s sale of Rafale fighter jets to Greece, its dispatch of the Charles de Gaulle nuclear-powered aircraft carrier to the Eastern Mediterranean, and its participation in joint military exercises with Nicosia and Athens, are an ostensible challenge to Turkey’s position and interests in the region.³ For Paris, these initiatives were necessary to “contain Turkey’s expansionism” and thwart what is viewed as Turkey’s “imperial fantasies” and “self-aggrandizement policy”⁴ in the region. The Turkish-French standoff is therefore, at its core, a power rivalry between a traditional, well-entrenched power in the Mediterranean – France – and an emergent middle power that acts as contender and challenger to the old regional order. In this sense, the Turkish-French confrontation is to be placed in the framework of the global power shift and the rise of middle powers who take a revisionist stand towards the *status quo ante* by questioning the European-centric order.

2. Interview on condition of anonymity, February 2021.

3. Interview with Tubanur Sonmez, advisor of President Erdogan, February 2021.

4. Interview with a senior policy advisor at the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs, September 2020.

THE TRIGGER OF THE CRISIS: TURKEY’S APPETITE FOR HYDROCARBON RESOURCES AND SENSE OF GROWING REGIONAL ISOLATION

In addition to Turkey’s self-perception as an autonomous power and its endorsement of an expansionist and ultranationalist naval doctrine, the recent gas discoveries in the EastMed⁵ have played a key role in pushing Ankara into a confrontational policy. The newly discovered resources have become a geopolitical priority for Turkey in light of the country’s energy outlook and energy strategy. Turkey is an emergent economy with limited access to energy resources, a situation that has made Ankara dependent on Russia, Iran, and Azerbaijan for its energy imports, and has aggravated the country’s budget deficit.⁶ Through hydrocarbon exploration, Turkey hopes to reduce its vulnerability and build its energy security. In addition, Turkey’s strategic objective since the 2000s has been to position itself as an energy hub in the EastMed and a corridor linking the energy exporting countries of the East to the European importing markets.

Yet, Turkey is exasperated by the growing difficulty to satisfy these ambitions and by France’s role in undermining them. While the projected route for the eastern

Mediterranean pipeline project passes through Israel, Greece, and Cyprus, excluding Turkey, Israel, Egypt, Greece, Jordan, Italy, the Palestinian Authority and Cyprus came together in January 2020 to form the Eastern Mediterranean Gas Forum – leaving Turkey and Turkish Cypriots isolated. Paris has strongly backed this Forum and, seen from Ankara, France’s alignment with Turkey’s regional adversaries (Egypt, Greece, Cyprus) is a betrayal; it makes the case for an urgent need for self-reliance and the resort to coercion in order to defend

Turkey’s interests and face the emerging coalition of old and new adversaries across the Eastern Mediterranean.

Turkey’s response to its perceived exclusion from the emerging energy and security order in the EastMed is two-fold. It rests on 1) an increasing deployment of hard power and a policy of disruption that materializes in the dispatching of military energy exploration vessels to contested areas; and on 2) a strategy of counterbalancing adversaries through building counter-alliances. Ankara’s recent overtures to Egypt and Israel, as well as its rapprochement with Lebanon, fall within this framework. Ankara’s attempt to mend relations with Cairo after the long period of divorce with Al-Sissi rests on the hope to negotiate a maritime demarcation deal with Egypt that would pull Cairo out from the deal it reached with Greece in August 2020. Similarly, Turkey views Lebanon as an important

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5. Gas discoveries were made by Israel in 2009 and 2010 (Tamar and Leviathan), Cyprus in 2011, and Egypt in 2015 (Zohr). Lebanon is currently undertaking exploration activities, with no discovery of proven resources yet.

6. In 2018, Turkey imported 72% of its energy needs. The country’s total budget deficit amounted to 220 billion USD, while its overall energy bill stood at 213 billion USD. Data from Central Bank.

player in the EastMed equation⁷ and sought to pull Beirut to its side in the energy rivalry over the EastMed by offering technical assistance and expertise in the realm of negotiations of maritime boundaries. Ankara precisely tried to push the Lebanese authorities to renegotiate a deal they reached with Cyprus in 2010 on their maritime boundaries by alluding that the deal is unfair and that Lebanon could secure a greater maritime jurisdiction area if it accepts Turkey’s assistance and transfer of know-how. This initiative shows Ankara’s double capacity to inflict harm on adversaries while at the same time launching a “charm offensive” at potential partners through offering support and assistance in the name of south-south solidarity.

LIBYA, SYRIA, AND LEBANON: PLAYGROUNDS OF THE FRANCO-TURKISH REGIONAL POWER RIVALRY

The Franco-Turkish standoff in the EastMed is embedded in a larger geopolitical confrontation between Paris and Ankara that plays out on three fronts: Libya, Syria, and – more recently – Lebanon.

The Libyan imbroglio: the intertwining of maritime disputes and geopolitical confrontation

The Franco-Turkish antagonism in Libya, which risked moving from a “proxy/cold war” to a direct confrontation following an incident between a French frigate and the Turkish navy off the Libyan coast in June 2020, provides a powerful example of the growing divergence of interests between Paris and Ankara. Such divergence risks turning into a long-time rivalry with important spillover effects on North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO)’s and the European Union (EU)’s internal dynamics, as well as the regional order in Europe’s southern neighborhood.

**Turkey found in Libya
a playground from which
to reassert its regional
leadership**

France’s intervention in the Libyan civil war in support of Haftar was driven by interests that directly clash with those of Turkey. Since the outbreak of the Libyan revolution, ensuring a pro-Paris government in Libya has been a centerpiece of French foreign policy given the importance of Libya in North Africa’s regional order. Through a hyperactive policy in Libya, President

Macron attempted to pursue four main objectives: preserve France’s influence and leadership over North Africa, a region that Paris considers as part of its direct sphere of influence; secure a share of Libya’s oil and gas industry; contain the spread of political Islam in Europe’s southern neighborhood; and thwart Turkey’s ambitions of regional leadership though siding with Ankara’s regional adversaries, namely Egypt and the United Arab Emirates.

7. Interview with Hakan Cakil, former Turkish ambassador to Lebanon, February 2021.

As to Turkey, its intervention in Libya in support of the United Nations (UN)-recognized Government of National Accord (GNA) of Sarraj is driven by diametrically opposed motives. At the geopolitical level, suffering from regional isolation following the failure of its policy towards the Arab revolutions, Turkey found in Libya a playground from which to reassert its regional leadership and regain influence. Ankara also viewed the Libyan civil war as a window of opportunity to push forward its Islamist agenda by bringing to power Muslim-Brotherhood inspired groups. At the economic level, Ankara seeks to access to new and lucrative construction contracts in the war-torn country. Interestingly, under Gaddafi, Turkey dominated the construction sector in Libya, with companies of Erdogan’s son-in-law, Selcuk Bayraktar, taking the lion share. It is mainly to preserve these benefits that Turkey intervened in the conflict. Lastly and most importantly, Ankara’s Libya policy is driven by the country’s energy interests: securing access to Libya’s oil and gas industry, and using Libya as a means to counterbalance Turkey’s adversaries in the EastMed maritime disputes. Through signing with the GNA a Memorandum of Understanding on the Delimitation of Maritime Jurisdiction Areas in the Mediterranean Sea (November 2019), Ankara put into practice its Blue Homeland doctrine and showed its intention to defend its expansive understanding of maritime boundaries. The agreement demarcates Turkey’s boundaries with Libya and creates a bilateral EEZ extending from Turkey’s southern Mediterranean shore to Libya’s northeast coast, encroaching on major Greek islands (Rhodes, Crete) and conflicting with Greece’s

definition of its own maritime boundaries. It is meant to prove Ankara’s disruption power and nuisance capacity, thus deterring adversaries from challenging it.

France’s major concern is that Ankara acts at a level that remains inaccessible for Paris: that of proxy warfare

According to aides of President Macron, Turkey has managed to emerge as a major trouble-maker and spoiler in France’s direct sphere of influence and “backyard”.⁸ Seen from Paris, Ankara’s bold moves are part of a broader geopolitical trend whereby emergent powers like Turkey

and Russia act in a more or less coordinated way to challenge and circumvent European/Western interests. Hence the “danger” of Turkey’s game in Libya lies precisely in that Ankara’s moves “normalize” the pattern of emergent powers questioning the status quo established by traditional powers and pursuing their military and political interests irrespective of Western preferences. Through provocative moves and unilateralism, they end up tipping the balance of power on the ground in their favor and creating a new geopolitical reality that does not accommodate Western interests.

In addition, France’s major concern is that in this geopolitical rivalry with Ankara, the latter acts at levels that remain inaccessible for Paris: that of proxy warfare. Turkey acquired in Syria its first experience in asymmetrical, proxy warfare. It has since then attempted to replicate this experience on other fronts (Libya, Nagorno-Karabakh) through mobilizing non-state groups and militias to advance its interests and political agenda. Paris is concerned that this is becoming a cost-effective way for Turkey to maintain a presence

8. Off-the-record interview with an advisor of President Macron, March 2021.

on several fronts and multiply its power of disruption, while at the same time avoiding military overstretch. On the long term, this would give Ankara an advantage over France in their geopolitical power rivalry. The French fears were aggravated by the change of power in Libya to the GNA’s advantage following the Turkish intervention in early 2020, which proved – in French eyes – that Ankara can effectively rely on proxies to change the dynamics of conflicts and impose new realities on the ground.

Syria: differences in threat perceptions and crisis of trust between Ankara and Paris

Another major source of friction between France and Turkey lies in divergences in threat perceptions, in particular in the context of the Syria crisis. While Ankara considers the PYD/YPG a national security threat, France has established direct contacts with these groups mainly because it views them as an asset and a partner in the fight against ISIS. And while Ankara views the PYD/YPG activism through the lens of separatism and considers it as a matter of terrorism, Paris looks at it through the lens of ethnic nationalism and minorities’ right to self-determination.

At the heart of the Franco-Turkish tensions in Syria lies a crisis of trust between the two parties. Paris looks at Turkey’s intervention in Syria with mistrust and suspects Ankara of using the Syria crisis to expand influence in the region. According to a high-level French diplomat at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, “chaos in Syria has created the perfect conditions for Turkey to softly “invade” the country and change dynamics on the ground to Turkey’s benefit”.

France’s perceived insensitivity towards Turkey’s security concerns dismays Ankara and lays the foundation of a serious crisis of confidence between the two countries. As a

Turkish diplomat puts it: “France has a Manichean/binary vision of the Kurdish issue: for President Macron, what is happening in Northeast Syria is a conflict between on the one hand, a country that aspires for regional hegemony (Turkey), and on the other hand a minority of “oppressed” people (the Kurds) who are fighting for their rights and who share common cultural values with the West”.⁹ France’s positive appreciation of, and support for, the PYD/YPG forces, is interpreted in Ankara as “selectiveness” in matters

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of terrorism. According to a high-level aide of President Erdogan: “When French interests are at stake and France’s security is challenged by a group like ISIS, the group is labelled as terrorist; but when a group like the PYD/YPG poses a direct challenge to Turkey’s security, the French see no problem in cooperating with it as long as it serves their interests”. In short, as the source puts it: “Our feeling is that France betrayed us. The French support for the PYD/YPG shows that when Europeans have their own interest at

9. Interview, January 2021.

stake, they have no issue jeopardizing and sacrificing their friends’ security”.¹⁰ This narrative of “betrayal by allies” ends up legitimizing Turkey’s growing militarization and its search for partners outside the EU/NATO circles.

On the short to medium term, France is unlikely to give up on the Kurds as support for the Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat (PYD)/Yekîneyên Parastina Gel (YPG) is actually driven by structural political and security factors. At the political level, in a context of growing Turkish footprint in Libya and the EastMed, Paris seeks to leverage the Kurds to curb Turkey’s regional ambitions. At the security level, a number of French jihadists are still prisoners of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF); by offering some political commitment and support to the Syrian Kurds’ cause, Paris hopes to obtain that the prisoners will not be released from SDF-controlled jails. France’s relationship with the PYD/YPG is thus a central element of its counterterrorism strategy.

Beyond divergences related to the Kurdish issue, Turkey and France have clashing interests in Syria, a country that has turned into a new playground for their geopolitical power rivalry. Both Paris and Ankara view Syria as belonging to their sphere of influence. In the 2000s, in the framework of its good neighborhood diplomacy (famously coined “zero

problems with the neighbors”), Turkey had invested in Syria both economically and politically more than in any other Arab country; in fact, given Syria’s central place in the Arab regional system, Damascus was seen as Turkey’s gateway to the Arab region. Through building up influence in Syria, Turkey sought to consolidate its regional power status. It is still determined to pursuing an active policy to maintain its place as a key player on

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the Syrian chessboard and participate in the shaping of the country’s postwar power configuration. More importantly, in Ankara’s calculations, Syria can be used as a trump card in negotiations over the future of the region, and serve as element of a great bargain with Western powers and regional players (Russia, Iran) over the distribution of “zones of influence” in the Middle East. Similarly, through providing support for the Syrian Kurdish combatants, France wants to regain some kind of political foothold in the conflict, in order to be able to weigh in on Syria’s post-conflict political stage.

In that sense, the Turkish-French rivalry over Syria sets the ground for a long-time power competition. France is concerned that Turkey has already managed to change reality on the ground through unilateral moves. The four Turkish military operations in North East Syria have entrenched Turkey’s presence, raising French concerns over a potential Turkish “invasion”. These operations, together with the agreement on maritime boundaries reached with Libya’s GNA, allowed Turkey to impose a new geopolitical reality on the southern flank of Europe. More importantly, seen from Paris, Turkey has managed to deal a blow to Western influence through directly challenging their diplomacy and mediation efforts¹¹. By co-launching with Russia and Iran the Astana Process, Ankara set up a diplomatic channel parallel to the Western-dominated Geneva one, and showed the

10. Interview, February 2021.

11. Interview with a diplomat at the Center for Policy Analysis, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, January 2020.

determination of regional rising powers to confiscate files and issues that have thus far been controlled by Western powers and considered as their preserve.

Lebanon: an emergent Turkish-French battlefield?

The Turkish-French rivalry plays out on a new front, which has thus far remained far from the spotlight: Lebanon. The Turkish leadership was deeply frustrated with the outpouring of support for French President Macron during the latter’s visit to Beirut following the explosion that hit the city on 4th August 2020. Ankara was offended by Macron’s newfound interest in Lebanon for two main reasons. First, Ankara considers Lebanon as part of its own sphere of influence. In the past two decades, as part of its “strategic depth” doctrine, Ankara

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massively invested in Lebanon, at the political, economic, and cultural/soft power levels, and has managed to become an influential player on the Lebanese scene and a patron of the country’s Sunni community. In this context, viewed from Ankara, Macron’s “Lebanon Initiative” is seen as foreign interventionism and meddling in Turkey’s own backyard, prompting Erdogan to accuse Mr Macron of “colonialism”. In the words of a high-level Turkish diplomat based in Paris: “Through the French Initiative

for Lebanon, Macron is practicing neo-imperialism in disguise. He wants to go back to the mandate era, to the colonial times, and is undermining Lebanon’s sovereignty”.¹² Clearly, Ankara views the French initiative as an attempt to place Paris at the heart of the Lebanese political game again, thus expanding French influence over Lebanon at the expense of the Turks in a sort of zero-sum game. Second, Turkey fears that closer relations between Paris and Beirut would pave the way for economic agreements allowing French firms to exploit Lebanon’s potential hydrocarbon resources. This fear was exacerbated by Macron’s proposal that the French company Total takes part in Lebanon’s hydrocarbon exploration activities. Hence, in Lebanon as in Libya, the geopolitical rivalry between France and Turkey overlaps with their dispute over energy issues.

In reaction to the perceived French interference in Lebanon, on the wake of Emmanuel Macron’s visit to Beirut, Turkey rushed a high-level official delegation to Lebanon that included the Turkish Vice-President. In addition to announcing a package of humanitarian aid to the victims of the Beirut blast and reaffirming Turkey’s strong footprint in Lebanon, the Turkish Vice-President seized the visit as an occasion to suggest that the port of Mersin in Southern Turkey be used as an alternative to Beirut. Through such proposal, Turkey seeks to consolidate its position on the map of large ports in the Eastern Mediterranean.

France looks with great suspicion at Ankara’s proactive Lebanon policy. Paris devotes such attention to it that it has created a cell within the French embassy in Beirut whose mission is to closely monitor Turkey’s activities. The cell is made up of diplomats and

12. Off-the-record conversation with the author, August 2020.

intelligence agents who “keep an eye” on Turkey and track Turkish activities and initiatives on the ground.¹³

THE FRANCO-TURKISH RIVALRY: FROM A PERSONAL/SUBJECTIVE DISPUTE TO AN ENTRENCHED GEOPOLITICAL RIVALRY

To make full sense of the Turkish-French rivalry, the personal/subjective factor must not be underestimated. A high-level Turkish diplomat based in Paris confesses that “when Macron was elected President, Erdogan put high hopes on him as he saw him as a “fresh” and “young” leader”;¹⁴ Ankara thus saw in Macron’s lack of political experience an opportunity to better control him and pull France by Turkey’s side. These hopes were deceived by the perceived French escalations against Turkey, in particular in the EastMed. Similarly, Paris views Erdogan as a “headache”.¹⁵ His assertive behavior recalls, in the French collective imaginary, the memory of the “powerful Turk” as a historical competitor, challenger, and even enemy of the West. Hence, Erdogan is essentially portrayed as a threat and a danger for France and Europe.

Yet, beyond the personal animosity between Macron and Erdogan, the political rift between Paris and Ankara is gradually turning into a long-time geopolitical rivalry, where France acts as a “keeper” and defender of European leadership, in particular in the Mediterranean, and Turkey as a rising middle power determined to challenge the current order. As expressed by Ibrahim Kalin, Erdogan’s senior advisor and spokesperson: “The liberal global order has proved to be neither liberal, nor global. It is not even an order. In such circumstances, a *new* Turkey has emerged [...], determined to defend its national interest and geostrategic autonomy, even if this means acting unilaterally when our friends and allies back our rivals”.¹⁶ In such context, normalization of Franco-Turkish relations is unrealistic on the short term, especially as “Macron vs./ Erdogan” is a fight both leaders want ahead of elections in their countries.

13. Field research by the author in Lebanon, 2020.

14. Off-the-record interview, November 2019.

15. *Ibid.*

16. Interview with the author, Ankara, July 2020.

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