Syria Transition Challenges Project

Discussion Paper (16)

Is Escalation Between France and Turkey in the Middle East and Beyond Inescapable?

Dorothée Schmid, IFRI Turkey and Middle East Program

The Geneva Centre for Security Policy (GCSP)

The Geneva Centre for Security Policy (GCSP) is an international foundation established in 1995, with 53 member states, for the primary purpose of promoting peace, security and international cooperation through executive education, applied policy research and dialogue. The GCSP trains government officials, diplomats, military officers, international civil servants and NGO and private sector staff in pertinent fields of international peace and security.

Syria Transition Challenges Project

A multilateral dialogue and research project that aims to build bridges between the EU, Russia, Turkey, and the US on the three issues of Reform, Refugees Return, and Reconstruction. The project is run by the GCSP in collaboration with European University Institute (EUI), Syrian Centre for Policy Research (SCPR), and swisspeace.

Editors:

Abdulla Ibrahim, Project Lead Researcher

Tamer Badawi, Research Assistant

Author

Dorothée Schmid

An expert on Mediterranean and Turkey issues, Dorothée Schmid holds a diploma in public management from Science-Po Paris and a PHD in Political Science from Panthéon-Sorbonne University. She worked as a country-risk analyst for Bank Crédit Agricole-Indosuez and carried out consulting missions for public institutions (European Commission, French Ministry of Economy, Ministry of Foreign Affairs), as well as NGOs and private companies, before joining Ifri in 2002.

Dorothée Schmid has produced extensive analysis on EU and French policies in the Mediterranean and the Middle East, the issue of induced democratization, political economy and the regional balance of powers. She has started and developed Ifri's Contemporary Turkey Program since 2008 in order to follow the transformations of Turkish politics and the rise of Turkish foreign policy in its neighbourhood and beyond. Her current research focusses on the dynamics of political reforms in the Middle East, the future of the rentier-state culture, post-conflict agendas and the new competition for influence among powers in the region.

The ideas expressed are of the author's not the publisher

Published in October 2020

All rights reserved to GCSP

In recent years, France and Turkey have been on opposing sides relating to Middle East concerns. The countries' disagreements over situations in Syria, Libya, the Eastern Mediterranean, and lately the Caucasus, have escalated significantly, generating fears of a proxy conflict with direct military confrontation between the two North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) members. Attempting to rally widespread European support, France assertively challenges the Turkish "neo-Ottoman" ambitions; while Paris is anxious of Ankara's acts outside of Paris's expectations for a historically narrowly defined Turkish national interests. In the medium-term, the two countries appear to be testing each other to redefine their respective zones of influence, adapting their foreign policy objectives in the turbulent dynamics of the post-Arab Spring era. This power competition resonates domestically, as both the French and the Turkish public are receptive to the developing negative narratives of "the other."

Syria: Cooperation, disagreement, and shifting leadership

The initial reaction of France to the Syrian uprising in 2011 was hesitant. Having already pushed for a costly military operation in Libya in March with an uncertain outcome, President Nicolas Sarkozy wanted to ensure that more regional military action in Syria would not lead to entanglements. Therefore, Paris would not take the risk of opening another front without being assured that its efforts could bring rapid political success, and the assessment from diplomats and intelligence agencies was discouragingly mixed.

Turkey, however, made an ambitious bet on Syria, possibly drawing the opposite lessons from the Libya operations that they had initially refused to join. The increasing spread of revolutions looked uncontrollable and developments in Libya suggested that state disintegration could have spillover effects on other regional hotspots. Turkey, sharing a 900 km border with Syria, observed the escalating tensions first-hand and made an early decision to back the Syrian opposition, leaving Sarkozy's France lagging behind. Ankara welcomed anti-Assad activists on its soil, tried to patron political groups, and provided arms to fighting factions; it also left the border open for refugees escaping combat to settle on the Turkish side.

When François Hollande became President in the spring of 2012, the official line was to work on a rapprochement with Turkey after years of bilateral tensions. The relationship had seriously deteriorated under Sarkozy over the EU accession debate – the former French President constantly repeated that Turkey was not a European country and that he was personally against it joining the EU. While French diplomats were certainly surprised by the scope of Turkey's early engagement in Syria, they also saw it as an opportunity to compartmentalise their relations with Ankara and cooperate on a particularly complex issue. Thereby, the French could avoid taking risks and instead

back Turkish diplomatic efforts whenever they converged with their interests. The most accessible common ground was to condemn Bashar al-Assad's war crimes and ask for an inclusive political transition.

That ad hoc cooperation scheme functioned well until two new political powers arose in Syria: the emergence of the Islamic State (IS) and the self-empowerment of the Kurds that manifested itself through the rise of the People's Protection Units (YPG). Until 2015, the French would turn a blind eye to the religious radicalization effect left by the infighting armed groups in Syria and the ambivalent, yet supportive, relationship that Turkey enjoyed with them. Laurent Fabius, the French Foreign Minister at the time, even stated that the Al-Qaeda-affiliated group Jabhat al-Nusra was doing "a good job" in Syria. However, the Charlie Hebdo terror attack in Paris became the turning point in relations. The Turkish official reaction to the tragedy was less than ambiguous. Ahmet Davutoğlu, the Turkish Foreign Minister, declared that the journalists should not have insulted Islam in the first place and that they were looking for trouble. At this time, more states looked deeper into the itineraries of European jihadi fighters and discovered that Turkey, with the implicit approval of state authorities, had become the main route to Syria or, as labelled then, the "highway of jihad." The image of Turkey started to deteriorate in the eyes of the French public, and this was only aggravated after Turkish armed forces and Syrian Arab proxies started to wage war on the Kurdish guerrilla forces of the *Yekîneyên Parastina Gel* YPG (People's Defence Units) in the North-East of Syria. As the backbone of the Syrian Democratic Forces, the YPG had become military allies of the anti-IS coalition and were more widely perceived as progressive heroes resisting authoritarian, ultra-nationalist, and imperialistic Turks.

From 2013 to 2016, from the Gezi demonstrations to a failed military coup attempt, Turkey had slowly estranged itself from its Western partners who had started denouncing the mounting authoritarianism and Islamization of Turkey under President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. After 2016, the Turkish President turned to Moscow to compensate for what he perceived as a complete lack of support from US and European partners. The political relationship with the West soured even more with every new Turkish military incursion in Syria. Posing itself as an irreplaceable member of NATO as its second biggest military force, Turkey was putting NATO under strain by buying Russian weapon systems which US and European countries opposed. Yet law enforcement and intelligence cooperation kept working efficiently to counter radical Islamism, which was seen as a shared threat for both Turkey and its European counterparts.

Libya: more power struggles behind values

In Libya, toppling Muammar al-Gaddafi did not result in immediate democracy building, and instead France and Turkey witnessed chaos growing. After 2014, France was increasingly aware of the possible spread of this new trend of radical Islam from the Levant region to North Africa. France also feared Libya, as a failed state, would become a main transit point for human trafficking from Africa to Europe. Simultaneously, France was also concerned for its economic interest in oil-rich Libya, once one of the most profitable locations for Total SE, a French energy company. Betting on the man who seemed best equipped to serve this multiple set of interests, Paris started to secretly assist Marshal Khalifa Haftar, providing him and his supporters with weaponry and military advice. The French DGSE (General Directorate for External Security), France's external intelligence agency, was primarily responsible for pursuing this risky strategy under President Hollande, with Paris fuelling the civil war while publicly supporting the UN-mediated peace process.

When Emmanuel Macron rose as the new President in 2017, he reached out to the UN Special Envoy, Ghassan Salamé, whose academic career in Paris made him very respected as an intellectual in circles close to Macron. The newly elected President presented himself as a peacemaker, in contrast to Nicolas Sarkozy's efforts to restore French reputation in the Middle East. In July 2017, Macron convened with the Tripoli-based Prime Minister Fayez al-Sarraj and his adversary Khalifa Haftar in La Celle-Saint-Cloud, near Paris, to set the foundation for a peace agreement. They met once again at the Elysée in May 2018, but negotiations were halted when Haftar's troops started their offensive to seize Tripoli in Spring 2019.

Turkey, for its part, looked at Libya from two different perspectives. It was first politically interested in the strengthening of Sarraj's internationally-recognized Government of National Accord (GNA), whose background and entourage looked compatible with Turkey's Justice and Development Party (AKP)'s ideological, pro-Muslim Brotherhood inclinations. Haftar had become a leader in the pro-conservative Arab camp backed by Egypt and the Emirates, and thus less acceptable to Turkey. This automatically placed Turkey in opposition to Paris's close political, cultural, and military ties with Cairo and Abu Dhabi. Second, Turkey wanted to get compensation for its forced exit from Libya in 2011, as it had quite a strong economic presence there before the war. Ankara thus started courting the legitimate-but-under-siege authorities of Tripoli, sending weapons and military advisors. Turkey finally joined the war in early 2020, deploying its own military and Syrian proxies to officially assist GNA's Sarraj. Sarraj allegedly rewarded Erdoğan by paying 12 billion US dollars for Turkish military protection, but both also signed a maritime

deal redefining their respective maritime zones, between Turkey's southern Mediterranean shore to Libya's northeast coast, stretching Turkish waters over the Greek and Cypriot zones.

Hence, France and Turkey found themselves on opposing sides in Libya. France's influence over peace negotiations was declining and passed over to Germany. Both France and Turkey were involved in the new peace process that started in Berlin in January 2020. Paris endorsed the conclusions insisting on a strict arms embargo towards Libya. Getting more nervous at Turkish military involvement in the conflict, French Foreign Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian denounced in May the "Syrianisation" of the Libyan conflict. A serious incident followed in June when the French frigate Courbet, taking part in NATO's naval operation off the coasts of Libya, claimed to inspect a cargo ship sailing under Tanzanian flag. The ship, which they suspected was transporting weapons and was escorted by the Turkish navy, did not stop. The French claimed that the Courbet was lit up by Turkish radars three times, which was considered a hostile act. The quarrel was transferred up to be discussed by NATO member states, but Paris did not manage to gain NATO consensus condemning Turkey.

This symbolic confrontation marked a tipping point for the French, causing great concern to high-ranking military officers. French worries were confirmed in the summer of 2020 as Turkish military intervention on the side of Tripoli managed to reverse the military balance of power in Libya, managing to outpower both Russia and the UAE, causing Haftar's force to retreat. Turkey could take advantage of European weaknesses due to the COVID-19 pandemic and it also kept on denouncing Paris's double-talk on Libya and its vested interests, which made Macron increasingly nervous.

Eastern Mediterranean: escalating tensions shift France's view of Turkey

The latest episode of the France-Turkey confrontation happened in the Eastern Mediterranean when Turkey repeatedly sent drilling vessels, with heavy military escort, inside the maritime zone of Cyprus, then Greece, triggering a very strong European reaction. France stood more firmly by Athens and Nicosia than the rest of EU member states, taking leadership and notably behaving in a much more threatening way than the German leader of the EU. Paris deployed two Rafale aircrafts to the Eastern Mediterranean to send a deterrence message to Ankara, implicitly warning for military escalation.

The rapid increase of tension should be understood against the backdrop of previous disagreements and skirmishes between France and Turkey. Parisian leaders have become exasperated by Ankara's activities in the region which increasingly undermine the trust between Western allies. Washington, being practically absent from Libya and notably unreliable on

committing to long-term policies in Syria, was not expected to discipline the Turks in the Eastern Mediterranean. The Germans were considered too lenient, both because they have very strong economic and social ties with Turkey, and because they lack a geostrategic vision. France remained the only real supporter of Greece, as France combined a strong sense of European leadership with military capacities and a real expertise on the Middle East.

Ankara's systemic and efficient opportunism in the East Mediterranean and the Middle East seems to have deeply upset the French. They are now witnessing the replication of Turkish intervention schemes within and beyond Turkey's immediate neighbourhood. Feeling outpowered, France has had to change their strategic assessment of Turkey's status in the region. Now Paris sees Ankara's activism as implementing a comprehensive imperialistic neo-Ottoman project. This project is revisionist by nature, where Turkey is contesting the delimitation of its borders with Syria and now with Greece. A pan-Turkic flavour has been added to this grand design in October when Turkey interfered in the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict – if not fuelled it – after claiming that "Armenia is the only obstacle to peace in the Caucasus." France seems to take AKP's inflammatory rhetoric at face value and very seriously. The French military paid particular attention to the resurgence of the *Mavi Vatan* "The Blue Homeland Doctrine." This plan, set by a Turkish admiral in 2006, claims that Turkey should control the three seas surrounding it, to ensure its regional influence and gain energy sources to support its economic and demographic growth.

De-escalation in the Aegean Sea was arguably more the result of American friendly pressure than of French threats. Nonetheless, the announcement by Paris in September 2020 that it will deliver an arms package comprising fighter planes, frigates, helicopters and weapons systems to Greece, only confirms that Paris does not bet on an end to tensions with Turkey. The French media have also adopted a very strong anti-Erdoğan stance and systematically denounce the rise of aggressive chauvinism in Turkey. French citizens have consequently formed a solidly negative opinion of Turkey, which is also nurtured by sympathy with the fate of the Kurds in Syria and Turkey. Continued denial of the Armenian genocide by Ankara is also a very sensitive issue in France, a country that hosts about 500,000 Armenians, most who are descendants of the survivors of the massacres.

The face-off was probably interpreted in a very symmetric way seen from Ankara. France is being portrayed in the Turkish media as a declining imperialistic intermediate power unhappy with Turkey's rising leadership. Macron's calls to combat "separatism" at home, targeting radical Islamists, is seen as a new outburst of Islamophobia that Turkey should condemn. Turks are notably irritated by French appeals to European solidarity in defending Greece, which sounds like a continuation of Sarkozy's plot to exclude them from the EU. They recognize differences in

viewpoints between France and Germany, sometimes even labelling Berlin an "honest broker" who will help mend their relationship with the EU. From Turkey's perspective, EU support is not unified as Italy and Spain appear as "swing states," less prone to confrontations with Turkey, and the UK is hesitant about how to act on Cyprus – where they keep military bases over Cyprus.

Additionally, one should not forget that the Aegean Sea issue appeals more to Turkish public sentiment than any commitment made in Libya – which they know little about, or Syria – from where they would like to disengage. France's closeness with Greece, but also with the Emirates, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Israel, drives a continued sense of isolation of the Turks – what they see as a large informal alliance slowly consolidating against them. Additionally, after years of mounting concerns, the French appear content to watch the current accumulation of disagreements between Russia and Turkey (in Syria, Libya, the Caucasus). Such developments also resonate with Macron's reiterated desire to make openings towards Moscow.

Moving beyond tensions

The crisis between France and Turkey may de-escalate as quickly as it flared up in the summer. The possibility of immediate European sanctions on Turkey was discarded after Ankara decided to withdraw its armada from Greek waters. Channels of communication were never closed and the Turkish Foreign Minister plans a visit in Paris before the end of October. This illustrates another rule in understanding the France-Turkey bond: provocative moves and aggressive rhetoric have always been a way to test each other –while exchanges mediated through Germany generally remain more "civilised."

Thus, *a posteriori* comments prevailed on the usual good cop/bad cop division of labour between France and Germany in dealing with Turkey, such as in the Sarkozy-Merkel times. Nonetheless, some real tensions arose between Paris and Berlin recently over what was perceived as French overreaction in the Eastern Mediterranean. The two will need to fine-tune their cooperation, perhaps formally, in order to be credible in the future.

As suggested by president of the incumbent European Council, Charles Michels, a grand conference is needed to openly discuss the multiple sensitive matters with Turkey. Among others, these matters include the Syrian refugees and economic cooperation where an upgrading of the EU-Turkey customs union could be on the table. Such a comprehensive effort would certainly help clarify Turkey's own regional agenda, which seems too ambitious, opportunistic, and volatile to be sustainable in the long-term.

The dynamics of the France-Turkey relationship look very unstable on the surface. Yet both countries know they have a long legacy in common and many priorities to manage together –

starting with law-enforcement and intelligence cooperation, which appears to have been working well. One urgent issue for the Turks would be to restore their image in the eyes of the French public, which has become very critical of Turkish foreign policy moves. In this regard, Ankara's overt appeal to the Turkish diaspora as a channel to spread tensions seems both inappropriate and dangerous. There is a lot of work ahead for France and Turkey to improve dialogue at both national and civil society levels to preserve mutual respect, and work together on a future political and security architecture for the Middle East.