

FRANCE-TURKEY RELATIONS AMID GEOPOLITICAL SHIFTS: AN ANALYSIS OF BILATERAL DYNAMICS AND REGIONAL IMPLICATIONS (2012-2019)

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Abstract

This article examines the dynamics of France-Turkey relations between 2012 and 2019, a period marked by recurring tensions yet characterized overall by structural continuity and sustained engagement. It argues that, beyond shifting geopolitical developments, bilateral relations were significantly shaped by the evolving domestic and foreign policy priorities, strategic recalibrations, and changing perceptions of both states. These transformations influenced the scope and direction of political dialogue and multi-sectoral cooperation. Despite periodic crises, deep-rooted interdependence functioned as a stabilizing factor, ensuring the preservation and relative continuity of the relationship throughout the period under study. To analyze these dynamics, the study adopts a multidisciplinary methodological framework grounded in strategic analysis. This is complemented by event analysis, which facilitates the identification and examination of pivotal moments and significant developments shaping bilateral relations. Furthermore, content analysis is employed to systematically assess diplomatic communications, policy documents, official statements, and media coverage, offering insights into the narratives and discourses influencing Franco-Turkish interactions. By integrating these methods, the study achieves a nuanced understanding of the political, diplomatic, and legal factors that guided the evolution of France-Turkey relations throughout the period under review..

Keywords: *France-Turkey Relations, European Union, negotiations, economic cooperation, Syrian conflict, geopolitical realities, bilateral strategic dialogue, multilateral diplomacy, NATO, foreign policy priorities.*

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A new phase in Franco-Turkish relations emerged in 2012 with the election of François Hollande, marking a recalibration rather than a rupture in bilateral engagement. The subsequent period was characterized by both intensified interaction and structural adaptation, shaped by domestic political adjustments as well as evolving regional power configurations in which both states played active roles.

Hollande's Conciliatory Approach and Early EU Accession Dynamics (2012–2014)

François Hollande, elected as the 24th President of the French Republic, adopted a comparatively more conciliatory and constructive discourse toward Turkey than his predecessor, Nicolas Sarkozy. His approach signaled a relative recalibration in the tone and diplomatic posture of France with respect to Ankara, reflecting both ideological differences and a broader reassessment of bilateral and regional priorities. An analysis of Hollande's position and intended policy toward Turkey indicates that he did not assume a rigid stance on the issue of Turkey's accession to the European Union.¹ His approach was grounded in the existing status of the negotiation process between Turkey and the European Union, emphasizing that accession talks had commenced long before without any predetermined or irrevocable outcome having been established.² Moreover, President Hollande did not refrain from articulating his intention to strengthen economic relations with Turkey, which, in his view, had suffered during Sarkozy's presidency. In doing so, he signaled the beginning of a normalization phase in Turkish–French relations.³

In the late 2000s, Ankara projected an ambitious legislative harmonization timeline aimed at accelerating its convergence with EU norms, initially framing 2013 as a symbolic milestone. European institutions, however, refrained from recognizing this target as a binding accession deadline.⁴ A similar strategic projection emerged in 2012, when Turkish leadership publicly associated prospective EU membership with the centenary year of the Republic in 2023.⁵ These symbolic timelines reflected not merely diplomatic optimism but a broader attempt to embed the accession process within Turkey's long-term state narrative.

¹ End France's Block on Turkey's EU Bid, President Hollande, 15.05.2012, <https://www.bloomberg.com/opinion/articles/2012-05-14/end-france-s-block-on-turkey-s-eu-bid-president-hollande>, (accessed November 3, 2025).

² Hollande: "pas d'adhésion de la Turquie à l'UE" dans "le prochain quinquennat", 11.04.2012, https://www.lepoint.fr/politique/hollande-pas-d-adhesion-de-la-turquie-a-l-ue-dans-le-prochain-quinquennat-11-04-2012-1450615_20.php, (accessed November 3, 2025).

³ Les 60 engagements de Hollande, 26.01.2012, https://www.liberation.fr/france/2012/01/26/les-60-engagements-de-hollande_791303/, (accessed November 3, 2025).

⁴ Turkey targets 2013 for EU legal compliance, 30.03.2007, <https://euobserver.com/enlargement/23813>, (accessed November 3, 2025).

⁵ Brussels declines to endorse 2013 date for Turkey's EU entry, 17.04.2007, <https://euobserver.com/enlargement/23881>, (accessed November 3, 2025).

Yet, as negotiations progressed, the accession framework gradually shifted in meaning for both sides, evolving from a structured integration pathway into a politically contested and strategically recalibrated process shaped by domestic transformations and geopolitical constraints.⁶ Former President Abdullah Gül further indicated that any eventual accession outcome would require domestic ratification through a referendum, underscoring the increasing internal politicization of the issue. For his part, Turkish President Abdullah Gül stated that, upon the completion of the accession process, Turkey would hold a referendum on its membership in the European Union.⁷

In June 2013, amid escalating domestic unrest in Turkey linked to the Gezi Park protests, several European actors reassessed their stance on the accession process.⁸ Germany's decision to halt progress on a negotiation chapter signaled the increasing interconnection between domestic political developments in Turkey and EU-level institutional responses.⁹ Turkish officials warned that such measures risked undermining the broader political framework of EU-Turkey engagement.¹⁰ Within this evolving context, France adopted a cautious yet strategically calibrated position, maintaining its veto over several chapters while postponing definitive decisions until after the 2014 European Parliament elections. Hollande's approach thus combined diplomatic signaling with institutional restraint, culminating in his January 2014 state visit to Ankara, which aimed to stabilize bilateral dialogue without fundamentally altering France's structural position within the EU framework.¹¹

Consolidation, Economic Engagement, and Bilateral Cooperation

In his address to the French community living in Turkey, President Hollande emphasized the significance of bilateral economic ties, noting that Turkey is part of Europe and stressing that France should uphold its commitments by allowing the

⁶ Merkel reassures Turkey on EU talks, Erdogan raps Cyprus, 04.11.2012, https://www.yahoo.com/?err=404&err_url=https%3a%2f%2fnews.yahoo.com%2fmerkel-reassures-turkey-eu-talks-erdogan-raps-cyprus-154249524.html, (accessed November 5, 2025).

⁷ Gül: 'Biz de AB üyelğini referanduma götüreceğiz', 12.02.2013, <https://web.archive.org/web/20150715021324/http://www.euractiv.com.tr/ab-ve-turkiye/article/gul-biz-de-ab-uyeligini-referanduma-goturecegiz-027101>, (accessed November 5, 2025).

⁸ Turkey protests spread after violence in Istanbul over park demolition, 21.05.2013, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/may/31/istanbul-protesters-violent-clashes-police>, (accessed November 5, 2025).

⁹ Germany blocks Turkey's bid to join EU, 21.06.2013, <https://www.ft.com/content/2432cc2c-d9c0-11e2-bab1-00144feab7de#axzz2WsY07fBe>, (accessed November 5, 2025).

¹⁰ Turkey welcomes new chapter in EU talks, wants more progress, 05.11.2013, <https://web.archive.org/web/20131109234257/http://www.todayszaman.com/news-330679-turkey-welcomes-new-chapter-in-eu-talks-wants-more-progress.html>, (accessed November 5, 2025).

¹¹ The President of France Visits Turkey, 27.01.2014, <https://www.azatutyun.am/a/25243594.html>, (accessed November 5, 2025).

opening of new negotiation chapters.¹² He also reiterated France's support for advancing additional chapters in the EU accession process. Notably, Chapter 22, concerning Regional Policy and the Coordination of Structural Instruments - which had been temporarily suspended during Sarkozy's presidency - was reopened shortly after Hollande took office.¹³ During his visit, Hollande met with Turkish President Abdullah Gül, reaffirming France's commitment to respecting and honoring its obligations in the context of Turkey's EU accession. This statement reflected an effort to rebuild diplomatic trust and demonstrate continuity in France's formal responsibilities within the European Union framework. He further highlighted that the accession process could help Turkey assess its potential, showcase its capabilities, and provide opportunities to strengthen institutional and operational competencies.¹⁴

Highlighting the mutually advantageous and strategically important trade and economic relations between France and Turkey, President François Hollande noted that France's share of the Turkish market had fallen to around three percent. This observation reflected growing concern in Paris over the country's declining economic footprint in Turkey and emphasized the need to strengthen bilateral commercial ties amid a more competitive global environment. Hollande also reiterated his commitment to expanding the operations of French companies in Turkey, while encouraging Turkish entrepreneurs to consider investment opportunities in France.¹⁵

Political Crises and Shifts in Bilateral Trajectory (2013-2017)

Despite France's ongoing diplomatic initiatives, several significant events - including the 2013 Gezi Park protests, the attempted coup in Turkey in 2016, the arrest of French journalist Olivier Bertrand in November 2016, and the April 2017 constitutional referendum - had a notable impact on bilateral relations.¹⁶ The referendum led to amendments in 18 articles of the Turkish Constitution, introducing a shift from a parliamentary system to a presidential one, eliminating the office of the Prime Minister, and reorganizing the number and structure of

¹² Allocution Devant La Communauté Française à Istanbul, Ministère de l'Europe et des Affaires Étrangères, 26.06.2014, <https://tr.ambafrance.org/Cumhurbaskani-Francois-Hollande>, (accessed November 5, 2025).

¹³ Hollande declines to open new EU chapter in Turkey, 28.01.2014, <https://euobserver.com/foreign/122889>, (accessed November 11, 2025).

¹⁴ Hollande évoque l'adhésion de la Turquie à l'Union européenne, 28.01.2014, https://www.lexpress.fr/actualite/monde/video-hollande-evoque-l-adhesion-de-la-turquie-a-l-union-europeenne_1317928.html, (accessed November 11, 2025).

¹⁵ President Hollande of France pays a state visit to Turkey, 28.01.2014, <https://www.mfa.gov.tr/president-hollande-of-france-pays-a-state-visit-to-turkey.en.mfa>, (accessed November 11, 2025).

¹⁶ Hollande tries to calm France's complicated relationship with Turkey, 28.04.2014, <https://www.france24.com/en/20140128-hollande-france-complicated-relationship-turkey>, (accessed November 11, 2025).

deputies in the Grand National Assembly, among other changes.¹⁷ In response, France voiced criticisms and, alongside other evolving political developments, undertook a reassessment of its policy approach toward Turkey. This resulted in a more measured adjustment of France's diplomatic strategy and engagement, reflecting both normative principles and pragmatic considerations.

In August 2014, Turkey held its presidential elections, resulting in the election of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan - who had previously served as Prime Minister from 2003 to 2014 and led the moderately conservative Justice and Development Party (AKP) - as the country's 12th President.¹⁸ Erdoğan's tenure inaugurated a distinct period in the political history of the Republic of Turkey, marked by significant institutional, structural, and geopolitical developments that shaped the trajectory of the nation during his presidency.¹⁹

Macron's Strategic Partnership Doctrine and Economic Continuity (2017-2019)

During this period, relations between Turkey and the European Union continued to develop, though they increasingly showed signs of gradual decline. This downward trend was influenced by a combination of objective factors, such as evolving geopolitical circumstances and institutional changes, as well as subjective elements, including the shifting foreign policy priorities and strategic recalibrations of individual EU member states, the EU collectively, and Turkey itself. Collectively, these dynamics contributed to a slowdown in the accession process and weakened its earlier transformative potential. Social surveys conducted in 2015 indicated that only around 20 percent of Turkish citizens supported EU membership for Turkey, a sharp decrease from the 75 percent recorded in previous years.²⁰

In January 2015, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan publicly stated that Turkey was no longer prioritizing its EU accession process.²¹ Comparable positions had been expressed earlier by Deputy Prime Minister Bülent Arınç, while the Minister for EU Affairs, Volkan Bozkır, indicated that the negotiations could not proceed in the format expected by the European Union, adding that Turkey's democratic institutions were, in some respects, more advanced than those of certain

¹⁷ The New Turkish Republic: The Dreams and Actions of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan 10.01.2017, <https://www.euointegration.com.ua/rus/articles/2017/01/10/7059808/>, (accessed November 11, 2025).

¹⁸ Recep Erdoğan: The 12th President of Turkey, 11.08.2014, <https://www.azatutyun.am/a/26524853.html>, (accessed November 12, 2025).

¹⁹ Gabrielyan H., Turkey Before the Presidential Elections, 29.07.2014, http://noravank.am/arm/articles/detail.php?ELEMENT_ID=12844, (accessed November 12, 2025).

²⁰ Turkey Is Not Interested in the Question of Joining the EU — President, 24.01.2015, <https://www.trend.az/world/turkey/2356772.html>, (accessed November 12, 2025).

²¹ Turkey's Erdogan to hold migration talks with EU, 05.10.2015, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-34440998>, (accessed November 12, 2025).

European states.²² These remarks illustrated a wider viewpoint among Turkey's political elite, raising doubts about whether the European Union truly upheld democratic principles or, in reality, functioned as an exclusive "Christian club" that marginalized non-Christian countries.²³ The discourse was aimed at formulating a policy approach that aligned domestic public opinion with the state's strategic objectives and foreign policy priorities, seeking coherence between internal legitimacy and Turkey's international positioning.

A renewed impetus in Turkey-EU relations emerged with the signing of the EU-Turkey Refugee Agreement in March 2016. The deal aimed to prevent the accession negotiations from becoming indefinitely stalled and to facilitate the potential for visa liberalization for Turkish citizens traveling to Europe. Despite these initiatives, however, the accession process largely stagnated from 2016 onward, due to ongoing structural, political, and strategic challenges on both sides. The European Union voiced concerns regarding human rights issues and shortcomings in the rule of law within Turkey.²⁴ By 2017, EU officials indicated that certain policies implemented by the Turkish government were inconsistent with the Copenhagen criteria for EU membership. In response, President Erdoğan announced that Turkey no longer regarded itself as an EU candidate country, further heightening the tensions already present in the bilateral relationship.²⁵

In 2017, the French Republic conducted its presidential elections, resulting in the victory of Emmanuel Macron, former Minister of the Economy, Industry, and Digital Affairs (2014-2016), who secured 66.1 percent of the vote.²⁶ Macron's presidency inaugurated what can be characterized as the fourth historical phase in France-Turkey relations, a period distinguished by notable structural shifts and significant events that together rendered it particularly dynamic and complex.

Throughout the 2017 campaign, national debates were predominantly focused on economic and security challenges, with candidates proposing strategies aimed at addressing these pressing issues. Voter concerns and electoral platforms emphasized fiscal stability and economic performance, which subsequently influenced the context in which France approached its bilateral economic and trade interactions with Turkey. As a result, policy toward Turkey occupied a

²² Meeting of heads of state or government with Turkey - EU-Turkey statement, 29.11.2015, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2015/11/29/eu-turkey-meeting-statement/>, (accessed November 12, 2025).

²³ Turkey-European Union Relations, https://www.ab.gov.tr/turkey-eu-relations_4_en.html, (accessed November 12, 2025).

²⁴ New clashes likely between Turkey, Europe, 22.06.2017, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2017/06/turkey-european-union-relations-possible-collision.html>, (accessed November 12, 2025).

²⁵ Turkey doesn't need EU anymore, but won't quit talks: President Erdoğan, 01.10.2007, <https://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/turkey-doesnt-need-european-union-president-erdogan-says-120199>, (accessed November 12, 2025).

²⁶ Macron beats Le Pen in French presidential election - as it happened, 19.05.2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/live/2017/may/07/french-presidential-election-emmanuel-macron-marine-le-pen>, (accessed November 12, 2025).

comparatively marginal position in the political discourse, marking a clear departure from previous electoral cycles where foreign policy and bilateral relations had figured more prominently.

Emmanuel Macron's positions on Turkey's EU accession during and after his presidential campaign reflected a careful evaluation of the state of Turkey-European Union relations at the time. He reiterated the approach previously expressed by former President Nicolas Sarkozy, emphasizing that a strategic partnership between Turkey and the EU would constitute a more viable path for engagement than pursuing full membership. Macron further developed this perspective during President Erdoğan's official visit to Paris, proposing the establishment of such a partnership as a means to prevent potential stagnation or setbacks in the ongoing accession process.²⁷ In doing so, he implicitly signaled skepticism regarding the likelihood that Turkey's accession negotiations would advance at the expected pace or ultimately result in full EU membership. At the same time, Macron highlighted the enduring importance of Turkey for France, particularly as a reliable trade partner, and affirmed his commitment to fostering and strengthening mutually beneficial bilateral relations and sectoral cooperation.

Despite occasional fluctuations and periods of political tension, France-Turkey trade and economic relations maintained a steady course of development. These economic ties played a crucial role in sustaining mutual interdependence and enhancing the structural connectivity between the two nations, thereby reinforcing the broader framework of bilateral engagement even amid challenging political circumstances. As of 2017, the volume of bilateral trade between Turkey and France amounted to USD 14.657 billion, reflecting a 9.4 percent increase compared to the previous year.²⁸ In 2018 and 2019, France ranked as Turkey's sixth-largest trading partner, while Turkey was France's fourteenth-largest partner. French investments in Turkey totaled USD 6.7 billion, whereas Turkish investments in France reached USD 7.6 billion.²⁹ These figures testify to the deepening of mutually beneficial trade and economic relations, which, despite the emergence of political and economic challenges and contradictions, continued to progress without significant disruption. This continuity preserved avenues for constructive sectoral dialogue and facilitated ongoing opportunities for joint cooperation.

By 2018, relations between Turkey and the European Union, which had already been experiencing a gradual decline, had progressed along a trajectory increasingly

²⁷ Face à Erdogan, Macron propose un «partenariat» plutôt que l'intégration de la Turquie à l'UE, 06.01.2018, https://www.lemonde.fr/europe/article/2018/01/06/face-a-erdogan-macron-propose-un-partenariat-plutot-que-l-integration-de-la-turquie-a-l-ue_5238179_3214.html, (accessed November 12, 2025).

²⁸ Commercial and Economic Relations between Turkey and France, <https://www.mfa.gov.tr/commercial-and-economic-relations-between-turkey-and-france.en.mfa>, (accessed November 15, 2025).

²⁹ Turkey exports to France, <https://tradingeconomics.com/turkey/exports/france>, (accessed November 15, 2025).

suggestive of deadlock. This situation was influenced both by complex geopolitical developments and by adjustments in foreign policy priorities and strategic orientations on the part of Turkey and the EU. Consequently, bilateral interactions underwent shifts, some of which reflected negative trends. On June 26, 2018, the EU General Affairs Council formally noted that Turkey was moving further away from the European Union, effectively halting accession negotiations and suspending any consideration of opening or closing additional negotiation chapters.³⁰ The Council also highlighted serious concerns regarding setbacks in the rule of law and fundamental rights, including freedom of expression.³¹ Following this, on February 20, 2019, the European Parliament committee voted in favor of suspending Turkey's accession negotiations, a decision that elicited strong criticism from the Turkish government.³²

It is crucial to recognize that the downturn in Turkey-European Union relations - one of the most significant contexts shaping France-Turkey interactions - combined with the pronounced disagreements and disputes between the parties, directly affected the trajectory of bilateral development and consolidation. These circumstances placed clear limitations on the scope of further cooperation within this framework. The outcome largely reflected each nation's strategic imperative to advance its political and economic interests, implemented through deliberate policies and measures that were guided by coherent planning and a logical sequence of actions aimed at achieving clearly defined objectives.

It is therefore understandable that Turkey has not completely dismissed the option of sustaining its relationship with the European Union. This position reflects a pragmatic acknowledgment of the EU's continuing strategic, economic, and political importance for Ankara, even amid ongoing stagnation and tensions in the accession process. As highlighted in official statements, the EU faces a period characterized by increasing international risks and internal challenges, necessitating the development of stronger cooperative mechanisms and the reinforcement of existing partnerships.³³ Within this context, Turkey considers its accession to the European Union both significant and necessary. This perspective demonstrates Turkey's strategic orientation toward safeguarding its national interests and suggests the potential for further strengthening bilateral ties, contingent upon security considerations and the broader objective of effectively advancing its national priorities.

³⁰ EU Council issues strong message about Turkey's obligations, 26.06.2018, <https://cyprus-mail.com/2018/06/26/eu-council-issues-strong-message-about-turkeys-obligations/>, (accessed November 15, 2025).

³¹ Council conclusions on Enlargement and Stabilisation and Association, 26.06.2018, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/35863/st10555-en18.pdf>, (accessed November 15, 2025).

³² 'Change it now!' Turkey FURIOUS as EU votes to STOP accession talks, 21.02.2019, <https://www.express.co.uk/news/world/1090402/EU-news-turkey-membership-eu-turkey-accession-latest-news>, (accessed November 15, 2025).

³³ Türkiye-Avrupa Birliği İlişkileri, 19.07.2019, <https://www.ab.gov.tr/4.html>, (accessed November 15, 2025).

Geopolitical Challenges: NATO, Defense Cooperation, and Eastern Mediterranean Tensions

During this period, the trajectory of France-Turkey relations was significantly shaped by a range of geopolitical developments, in which both countries pursued distinct strategic objectives. These dynamics highlight the complex interplay between bilateral priorities and broader regional and international considerations in directing the course of their relationship. In particular, Turkey's agreement with Russia on the acquisition of the S-400 missile defense system - despite its status as a NATO member - should be understood not solely from an economic standpoint but within a wider geopolitical framework.³⁴ This approach recognizes Turkey's role as a key participant in NATO's collective missile defense system and underscores its strategically important position within the Alliance, contributing to the overall security and stability of Europe's defense architecture.

From the European Union's perspective, Turkey, as a key NATO member, functions as a strategic gateway to the Middle East, a region where France seeks to maintain substantial engagement to safeguard its national interests. In this context, the evolution and deepening of Turkish-Russian relations, alongside Turkey's multifaceted and multi-vector foreign policy, carry significant strategic and economic implications for France.³⁵ This is especially pertinent given Turkey's repeated declarations concerning the establishment of its own missile defense system, officially confirmed by President Erdoğan in November 2018.³⁶

In this context, it is important to highlight that in 2018, Turkey entered into agreements with the Franco-Italian consortium Eurosam, as well as with Turkish firms Aselsan and Roketsan, to carry out a series of studies and research initiatives aimed at developing Turkish air and missile defense capabilities.³⁷ These efforts were intended to lay the groundwork for the trilateral implementation of Turkey's air and missile defense programs and to create a foundation for mutually advantageous collaboration between Turkey, France, and Italy in this sector, thereby promoting both strategic and industrial objectives.

It can be emphasized that, from NATO's perspective, the significance of these developments lies in their collaborative design and implementation alongside other Alliance members. This collective methodology enhances both operational

³⁴ Turkey signs deal to get Russian S-400 air defence missiles, 12.09.2017, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-41237812>, (accessed November 15, 2025).

³⁵ West's reluctance to share tech pushes Turkey further into Russian orbit, 10.01.2020, <https://www.defensenews.com/global/europe/2020/01/10/wests-reluctance-to-share-tech-pushes-turkey-further-into-russian-orbit/>, (accessed November 15, 2025).

³⁶ Erdogan's Turkey: Key events and developments, 20.06.2018, <https://www.france24.com/en/20180620-turkey-timeline-recep-tayyip-erdogan-key-events-developments-grip-power-coup-election>, (accessed November 15, 2025).

³⁷ Turkey Signs Agreement with Eurosam for SAMP/T, 20.07.2017, <https://missilethreat.csis.org/turkey-signs-agreement-eurosam-samp/t/>, (accessed November 21, 2025).

cohesion and the strategic interoperability of the Alliance. Furthermore, the initiative was carefully aligned with NATO's broader security and defense framework, as the system under development was intended to serve as an advanced, fully integrated iteration of the SAMP-T air defense system previously developed by Eurosam.³⁸

Turkey's acquisition of the Russian S-400 Triumph system is interpreted by the European Union - particularly through the lens of France - not merely in the context of EU-Russia or NATO-Russia relations, or the sanctions imposed on Russia, but within the broader framework of NATO's collective security architecture. This approach situates the EU's and NATO's growing concerns, emerging contradictions, and operational challenges within a comprehensive strategic perspective. The significance of this view is further underscored by statements from NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg, who observed that Washington, Paris, and Rome were engaging with Ankara to explore alternatives to the Russian Triumph system.³⁹ These discussions ultimately reached a successful resolution, exerting a moderately stabilizing influence on bilateral relations and positively shaping their developmental trajectory.

Several additional factors have shaped France-Turkey relations, including the gradual intensification of disagreements over the Syrian conflict⁴⁰, tensions stemming from the European Union's migration crisis and its ramifications, the strengthening of Russian-Turkish defense and economic cooperation⁴¹, and France's persistent critique concerning limitations and violations of human and civil rights in Turkey.⁴² Notably, the Committee to Protect Journalists reports that during the tenure of the Justice and Development Party, media personnel faced the highest number of attacks in the nation's history⁴³. Collectively, these issues remain key sources of political tension, with the two countries often holding divergent and conflicting positions on these matters.

³⁸ Khojayan K., April 24 in France: Domestic and Foreign Motivations for Declaring it as the National Day of Remembrance of the Armenian Genocide. *Lraber of Social Sciences*, no. 3, Yerevan, 2019, pp. 32-33.

³⁹ Turkey starts talks with France, Italy over air defense systems, Stoltenberg says, 20.09.2017, <https://armenpress.am/eng/news/905894/turkey-starts-talks-with-france-italy-over-air-defense-systems-stoltenberg-says.html>, (accessed November 21, 2025).

⁴⁰ Macron's criticism of Syria invasion 'sick and shallow', says Erdoğan, 29.11.2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/nov/29/macrons-criticism-of-syria-invasion-sick-and-shallow-says-erdogan>, (accessed November 21, 2025).

⁴¹ Political, economic cooperation between Turkey, Russia continue to deepen, 23.11.2018, <https://www.dailysabah.com/diplomacy/2018/11/23/political-economic-cooperation-between-turkey-russia-continue-to-deepen>, (accessed November 21, 2025).

⁴² 'Turkey's advances, influence detrimental to France', 26.03.2021, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/europe/turkeys-advances-influence-detrimental-to-france/2189078>, (accessed November 21, 2025).

⁴³ Turkey's Press Freedom Crisis, 09.02.2013, <https://cpj.org/reports/2012/10/turkeys-press-freedom-crisis-summary/>, (accessed November 21, 2025).

France-Turkey relations have long been characterized by polarization, particularly in the context of the Syrian crisis⁴⁴, which continues to represent one of the most sensitive areas in bilateral interactions. France's approach is guided by its strategic priorities and policy framework, focusing on restoring and maintaining regional stability, preventing and addressing international and transnational crimes, and advancing its national interests through initiatives aimed at optimizing the realization of its strategic objectives. In managing the crisis, France seeks to establish conditions conducive to a reliable and inclusive political process, working collaboratively with its allies and promoting the resumption of negotiations to facilitate a constructive resolution.⁴⁵ France aims to maintain its involvement in Syria through a fourfold strategy, composed of interconnected and mutually reinforcing elements, with the goal of achieving a durable and comprehensive resolution to the conflict. This strategy encompasses continued operations against the Islamic State in coordination with international coalition partners, the provision of humanitarian aid to affected civilian populations, and the facilitation of a swift political solution to the crisis - primarily by supporting United Nations-led initiatives, which remain the principal avenue for ending the conflict and restoring lasting peace in the region.⁴⁶

Since 2014, France has undertaken a series of military operations in Syria and Iraq, primarily targeting Islamic State-affiliated fighters. Among these, Operation Chammal, initiated in September 2014 and continuing into 2015, consisted exclusively of airstrikes, with no deployment of ground forces, as emphasized by President Hollande.⁴⁷ Notably, on November 13, 2015, Paris suffered terrorist attacks claimed by the Islamic State as retaliation for the operation, prompting an intensification of French military actions in Syria.⁴⁸ Following these attacks, French forces intensified their strikes against the terrorist organization in Syria. More broadly, French interests in the Middle East - particularly in Syria and Lebanon - have historically occupied a central and often overriding position within the country's foreign policy and diplomatic priorities. This prominence is rooted not only in France's long-standing historical ties and close relations with these states but also in the evolving strategic importance of the Eastern Mediterranean region. Frequently, French objectives in the region have come into tension with

⁴⁴ Syria: The story of the conflict, 11.03.2016,

<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-26116868>, (accessed December 1, 2025).

⁴⁵ War in Syria: Understanding France's position,

<https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/en/country-files/syria/war-in-syria-understanding-france-s-position/>, (accessed December 1, 2025).

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ France plans further air strikes against IS: President, 19.09.2014,

<https://web.archive.org/web/20140923035119/http://www.mathrubumi.com/english/news/latest-news/france-plans-further-air-strikes-against-is-president-152050.html>, (accessed December 1, 2025).

⁴⁸ Paris attacks: French police launch raids as military strikes Isis in Syria, 14.11.2015,

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/nov/15/paris-attacks-car-found-with-kalashnikovs-as-gunmans-relatives-questioned>, (accessed December 1, 2025).

Turkish strategic aims, creating a pronounced conflict of interests within a geopolitically critical area.

Syria, Eastern Mediterranean, and the Dynamics of Bilateral Tensions

France–Turkey relations over the Syrian conflict became increasingly strained following France’s declaration that, in the wake of the U.S. military withdrawal from Syria, it intended to maintain a presence in the country to safeguard the interests of the local Kurdish population.⁴⁹ France’s active support for Kurdish self-defense units - viewed by Turkey as terrorist organizations - further heightened tensions, particularly in Manbij, where Turkey had prepared corresponding military operations. Additionally, France offered to mediate in the Turkish-Kurdish conflict after bilateral relations reached a critical juncture in January 2018. Turkey responded firmly, rejecting any external attempts to facilitate dialogue or mediation with groups it considered terrorist, asserting that friendly nations should not legitimize acts of terrorism.⁵⁰ Shortly thereafter, Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu publicly accused President Macron of sponsoring terrorism, referencing France’s stance on the Kurdish issue.⁵¹

France–Turkey relations reached a particularly high level of tension with the launch of Turkey’s Operation Peace Spring on October 9, 2019 - marking Turkey’s third major military intervention in Syrian territory since 2016, following Operations Euphrates Shield (2016–2017)⁵² and Olive Branch (2018).⁵³ As with previous operations, this initiative underscored the divergent positions of the two countries: on one side, Turkey’s foreign policy priorities and objectives, which had been reshaped since 2014; on the other, France’s increasingly assertive and uncompromising political stance, whose maximalist approach continued to shape the dynamics of bilateral relations.

It is important to recognize that the Syrian issue significantly influenced France–Turkey relations, not only on a bilateral level but also within multilateral frameworks, most prominently NATO, which holds critical importance for both nations.⁵⁴ This dynamic further heightened tensions and led to a reevaluation and

⁴⁹ Fearing Islamic State revival, France warns U.S., Turkey after Syria moves, 07.10.2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-syria-security-turkey-france-idUSKBN1WM1IR>, (accessed December 7, 2025).

⁵⁰ Syria war: France offers to mediate between Turkey and Kurds, 20.03.2018, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-43592323>, (accessed December 7, 2025).

⁵¹ Macron is a sponsor of terrorism, says Turkish foreign minister, 28.10.2019, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-50584935>, (accessed December 7, 2025).

⁵² Gabrielyan H., Turkey’s ‘Operation Euphrates Shield’, 04.04.2017, http://www.noravank.am/arm/articles/detail.php?ELEMENT_ID=15597, (accessed December 7, 2025).

⁵³ Operation ‘Olive Branch’: Statistics on Turkish Casualties and Wounded, 27.01.2018, <https://razm.info/120762>, (accessed December 7, 2025).

⁵⁴ Macron takes swipe at halting NATO reaction to Turkey’s Syria incursion, 18.10.2019,

reinterpretation of mutual perceptions both inside and outside the Alliance. These developments directly impacted the policies pursued by each country, often resulting in conflicting approaches and occasionally prompting adjustments to the broader trajectory of bilateral relations.

Tensions between France and Turkey escalated sharply in November 2019, when Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan issued highly provocative remarks aimed at French President Emmanuel Macron, following France's criticism of Turkish military operations in northern Syria. Erdoğan challenged Macron's understanding of Middle Eastern affairs, asserting that while Turkey held a critical position within NATO, Macron lacked the necessary insight. He also criticized Macron's experience with counterterrorism, linking it to domestic unrest exemplified by the Yellow Vest protests, thereby underscoring the ongoing and intensifying strain in bilateral relations.⁵⁵

In response to these remarks, Turkey's ambassador to France was summoned to the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs to provide clarifications, as the French authorities regarded Erdoğan's statements as a serious affront.⁵⁶ This episode also influenced the trajectory of bilateral relations in the period immediately preceding and during the NATO summit in London.⁵⁷

It is therefore unsurprising that in December 2019, President Macron publicly stated that no consensus could be achieved with Turkey regarding the definition of terrorism, particularly concerning disputes over Kurdish armed groups and Ankara's military operations in northern Syria. These operations targeted one of France's key partners in the fight against the Islamic State, generating tension not only in bilateral relations but also within NATO itself. Turkey's role and policies have long represented a critical agenda item, given their implications for international and regional security structures.⁵⁸ Macron's remarks, made before and after NATO's seventieth-anniversary summit in London, underscored the complexity of the challenges involved and the persistent friction surrounding this strategic actor.⁵⁹

<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-syria-security-turkey-macron-idUSKBN1WX1QX>, (accessed December 7, 2025).

⁵⁵ 'You Should First Have Your Brain Checked': Erdoğan Insults Macron, 29.11.2019, <https://armeniasputnik.am/world/20191129/21260453/du-skzbic-qo-uxexy-stugir-erdoxany-viravorele-makronin.html>, (accessed December 22, 2025).

⁵⁶ The Turkish Ambassador in Paris Has Been Summoned to the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs to Provide Explanations, 29.11.2019, <https://artsakhpress.am/arm/news/117720/parizum-turqiayi-despany-kanchvelu-e-fransiayi-agnbacatruyunner-talu.html>, (accessed December 22, 2025).

⁵⁷ 'Sometimes allies don't agree on all issues,' NATO's secretary general says, 03.12.2019, <https://www.cnn.com/2019/12/02/nato-summit-stoltenberg-responds-to-turkey-france-brain-dead-spat.html>, (accessed December 22, 2025).

⁵⁸ Turkey's crisis with the West: how a new low in relations risks paralyzing NATO, 19.11.2020, <https://warontherocks.com/2020/11/turkeys-crisis-with-the-west-how-a-new-low-in-relations-risks-paralyzing-nato/>, (accessed December 22, 2025).

⁵⁹ NATO 70th Anniversary: Leaders' Meeting in London - What's it all about?, 27.11.2019,

Another source of contention in France-Turkey relations concern the exploitation of gas reserves discovered in the Eastern Mediterranean, off the coast of Cyprus. This issue continues to generate disputes and intensify existing tensions, thereby impeding further bilateral cooperation.⁶⁰ Notably, the French energy company Total is among the three principal firms that have commenced drilling on the Cypriot continental shelf - a development that has elicited growing concern from Turkey due to its claims and strategic interests in the region's gas resources.⁶¹ The situation has escalated to the extent that both French and Turkish naval forces were deployed near the drilling sites in the Eastern Mediterranean.⁶²

Meanwhile, the leaders of both countries engaged in a series of public statements and criticisms, further intensifying tensions. Notably, on 7 May 2019, the French government called on Turkey to halt drilling in Cyprus's "exclusive economic zone," prompting a sharp rebuttal from President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, who stated: "What are you talking about? We share a coast with Cyprus. Turkey is a guarantor country in the Cyprus issue. Greece and the United Kingdom are also guarantors. And who are you, anyway?"⁶³ The dispute also manifested in concrete actions: earlier, Cypriot authorities detained the crew of a Turkish vessel that had begun oil and gas drilling off the Cypriot coast⁶⁴. This episode illustrates how competition over resources in the Eastern Mediterranean has become a persistent source of friction in France-Turkey relations.

Conclusion

Between 2012 and 2019, the evolution of France-Turkey relations, though subject to ongoing changes, generally followed a discernible pattern of development. This trajectory was shaped not only by a complex set of geopolitical events but also by

<https://www.westminster.ac.uk/events/nato-70th-anniversary-leaders-meeting-in-london-whats-it-all-about>, (accessed December 22, 2025).

⁶⁰ Gevorgyan A., *The Impact of Global and Regional Developments on Turkey's Involvement in International Energy Processes*, Yerevan State University, Center for Civilizational and Cultural Studies, Analytical Bulletin, No. 9, Yerevan, 2016, p. 91, <https://ccsysu.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/5Arshak.pdf>.

⁶¹ French, Italian Companies Will Drill for Energy off Cyprus, 21.02.2021, https://www.thenationalherald.com/archive_general_news_greece/arthro/french_italian_companies_will_drill_for_energy_off_cyprus-255060/, (accessed December 22, 2025).

⁶² Turkey Is No Longer a Partner in the Eastern Mediterranean: Macron Criticizes Erdoğan, 10.09.2020,

<https://armeniasputnik.am/world/20200910/24419358/turqian-arevelyan-mijergrakan-tsovum-aylevs-gorcynker-che-makrony-qnnadatele-erdoxanin.html>, (accessed December 22, 2025).

⁶³ Erdoğan to Macron: 'Who Are You, After All?'

<https://www.ermenihaber.am/am/news/2019/06/17/%D4%B7%D6%80%D5%A4%D5%B8%D5%B2%D5%A1%D5%B6-%D5%84%D5%A1%D5%AF%D6%80%D5%B8%D5%B6/157430>, (accessed December 22, 2025).

⁶⁴ What now for Turkey in Cyprus and eastern Mediterranean?, 23.10.2020,

<https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2020/10/turkey-eastern-mediterranean-turkish-cypriots-elections.html#ixzz6srgjKA6b>, (accessed December 22, 2025).

internal and external political adjustments, shifting strategic priorities, and the continuous reassessment of national interests and perceptions in both states. Together, these elements framed the outlook for the future of bilateral ties and multilateral collaboration, reflecting the historical and enduring interdependence between the two countries, which has consistently underpinned the continuity of their relationship.

The progression of relations during the two distinctive periods - 2012-2017 and 2017-2019 - was largely driven by the pursuit of national interests and the determination of both parties to maximize the achievement of their strategic objectives. The resolution and management of key political and economic developments during these phases were guided by this rationale, while differences in policy approaches further amplified the complexity and sensitivity of emerging issues within the broader bilateral framework.

As of today, it is increasingly evident that France and Turkey maintain sharply divergent positions on several critical international matters, particularly in regions affected by global conflicts. This fundamental divergence continues to generate turning points and shifts in the trajectory of their relations, keeping the bilateral dynamic in a state of ongoing adjustment, characterized by alternating phases of advancement and retrenchment.

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Conflict of Interests

The author declares no ethical issues or conflicts of interest in this research.

Ethical Standards

The author affirms this research did not involve human subjects.