

Turkish-French Relations in the Post-Cold War Era



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1 Introduction

This chapter aims to shed light on the basic characteristics and different periods of Turkish-French relations in the post-Cold War era. In order to do that, authors will first try to create a theoretical framework to explain Franco-Turkish relations starting from the early 1990s until today. Secondly, Turkish-French relations after the Cold War will be analyzed within the tenure in office of different French Presidents in order to distinguish consistencies and alterations. Accordingly, starting from the second Presidential term of François Mitterrand, all French Presidents' tenures in office will be analyzed under specific subchapters in terms of the most important themes and events in bilateral relations. Focusing on different French Presidents in explaining Turkish-French relations is not a haphazard choice; as Kessler noted (1999, pp. 21–22), French Presidents have a central role in determining and implementing foreign policy in the Fifth Republic via the powers granted to them with the 1958 constitution.

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Moreover, the categorization was made based only on French Presidents since Turkey had too many Prime Ministers between 1991 and 2018.¹

This chapter is based on the analysis of primary and secondary sources written on this subject in three main languages; English, French, and Turkish. In that sense, all important scholarly texts (books, articles, theses, and reports) are carefully analyzed by the authors. Moreover, presidential and ministerial declarations and important interviews are researched through internet archives and official websites. Another important methodological tool implemented by this study is the use of statistical data in assessing quantity-based issues.

2 Theoretical Framework

Turkish-French relations in the post-Cold War era can be categorized as a “double-edged sword”. On one side, there are historical amicable relations and deep political, economic, cultural, and social ties, but on the other side, there are suspicions and competitive feelings as well as contradicting interests in some issues. Since France was a founding member of North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) in 1949 and Turkey was one of the earliest members (1952), both countries were classified as “Western/Occidental states” and “U.S. allies” throughout the Cold War. However, while France withdrew from the integrated military command of the Alliance between 1966 and 2009, Turkey also acted on its own when Turkish national interests did not coincide with American interests in the 1970s, and organized the Cyprus Peace Operation in 1974. This was related to the two countries’ strong imperial legacies as well as their Gaullist and Kemalist traditions of foreign policy that prioritize national interests above bloc politics. In addition to NATO membership, both Turkey and France supported the United Nations (UN)-based international order and became two of the earliest members of the Council of Europe in 1949. Moreover, this pair of countries became founding members of the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) in 1961 by showing their commitments to the liberal international order against the Soviet-led communist developmental model.

With the fall of the USSR and the end of the Cold War (1947–1991), Turkish-French relations entered into a new period in the early 1990s. Turkey’s growing regional and global political ambitions as well as increasing economic activities

¹ There were 11 different Turkish Prime Ministers between 1991 and 2018; Yıldırım Akbulut (1989–1991), Mesut Yılmaz (1991–1991), Süleyman Demirel (1991–1993), Erdal İnönü (1993–1993), Tansu Çiller (1993–1996), Necmettin Erbakan (1996–1997), Mesut Yılmaz (1997–1999), Bülent Ecevit (1999–2002), Abdullah Gül (2002–2003), Recep Tayyip Erdoğan (2003–2014), Ahmet Davutoğlu (2014–2016), and Binali Yıldırım (2016–2018). Binali Yıldırım became the last Turkish Prime Minister. Since Turkey made a transition into a new Presidential system via a referendum in 2017, after the 2018 Presidential election, the post of Prime Ministry was dissolved. Recep Tayyip Erdoğan was already the 12th President of the Republic after the Presidential election in 2014. However, after the 2018 Presidential election, Erdoğan became Turkey’s first President of the Republic within the Presidential system.

in new regions (Balkans, Middle East, Caucasus, and Africa) alerted France to act as a counterbalance against the rise of Turkey. Turkey, in this new state of affairs, rediscovered its Turkic and Muslim identity in order to reach countries that are beyond its classic foreign and economic policy boundaries. Accordingly, during the ongoing Justice and Development Party/AK Parti era (2002), Turkey is often highlighted as an ambitious actor for increasing both its soft and hard power abilities in different regions.² Starting from the 1990s, Turkey's transformation into a regional power coincided with the crystallization of Turkey's Muslim identity. This has become another source of anxiety for France, which has always been the main promoter of hardliner secularism in the Muslim world. Moreover, in the post-Cold War order, due to globalization, transient U.S. hegemony and unipolarism until the Iraqi War, the quick rise of China, the return of Russia to great power politics, and German advancements and leadership within the European Union (EU), France has begun to be perceived as a passenger that "takes a ride in a first-class compartment with a second-class ticket" (Örmeci & Bezmez 2019, p. 324). While France has continued to be one of the five most important countries in the world via its UN Security Council seat, its capacities were not considered sufficient anymore to be treated as a superpower that could take the lead and direct global political developments. In fact, as noted by Bozo (2012, p. 8), starting from Charles de Gaulle and the Fifth Republic, the main problem with French foreign policy has been needing to reconcile grand international aspirations with limited resources. Kessler referred to this (1999, p. 153) as "*recherche du rang*" (search of rank). This was another key motive in explaining French attitude towards growing and self-ordained Turkey.

Accordingly, Turkish-French relations have developed on the model of a double-edged sword. From time to time, positive political, economic, cultural, and social relations dominated the scene and determined the general mood of bilateral relations by encouraging further integration (e.g. Turkish accession to EU and increasing socioeconomic ties etc.) between two countries such as in Jacques Chirac and earlier François Hollande presidency. However, in many other times (e.g. Nicolas Sarkozy and Emmanuel Macron presidency), multiple factors contributed to a conflictual mood in bilateral relations such as conflicting interests, political disputes such as the Armenian Genocide allegations and the Kurdish Question, different civilizational backgrounds and cultural differences, and France's aspiration to counterbalance increasing Turkish penetration and influence in some areas.³ The last key issue in understanding post-Cold War Franco-Turkish relations is Turkey's EU candidacy,

² Donelli and Levaggi defined Turkish foreign policy's main goal during the AK Parti governments as to "become a regional power with global appeal" (Donelli & Levaggi 2016, p. 108). While many Western critics were afraid of Turkey's recent transformation and adoption of a more assertive foreign policy, many others including Paul Henze thought that this could be used as an advantage for Turkish-American relations since Turkey could reach Turkic and Muslim nations better than Western states (Örmeci 2020a, 2020b, pp. 63–65).

³ For instance, in a recent strategic document prepared FRS (Fondation pour la Recherche Stratégique) in 2018, a French think-tank whose Assistant Director Bruno Tertrais is an advisor to President Macron, one of the most main problems in the Eastern Mediterranean is stated as "Turkey's efforts to become a regional power by using the Ottoman heritage" (Ruffié et al., 2018,

which increased French/European eagerness in criticizing Ankara's democratic deficiencies and human rights violations. To explain it more literally, Turkish-French relations in the post-Cold War era can be described as a "rotating pendulum" that sometimes makes progress and sometimes goes the opposite direction. Thus, Turkish-French relations in the post-Cold War can be "volatile" at best, though there is a sound basis and great potential for establishing a harmonious alliance and a solid axis due to decades – if not centuries – old political, economic, cultural, and social ties between the two nations.

3 Turkish-French Relations in the Post-Cold War

In this part, Turkish-French relations during the post-Cold War period will be analyzed chronologically by focusing on successive French Presidents. This part will only assess the second Presidential term of François Mitterrand since his first term (1981–1988) was characterized by Cold War dynamics.

3.1 *François Mitterrand (1988–1995)*

Socialist Party (*Parti Socialiste*-PS) leader François Mitterrand became the fourth in total and first left-wing President of the French Fifth Republic in 1981. He was surprisingly elected over the incumbent Valéry Giscard d'Estaing with the slogan of "*la force tranquille*" (calm power) (Price, 2016, pp. 404–406). He was comfortably re-elected in 1988 with 54% of the votes for another seven years term. He remains the longest-serving French President with 14 years in power. Overall, Mitterrand's period could be described as the initial phase of post-Cold War Franco-Turkish relations, with earlier signals of disaccord between the two sides in terms of the Kurdish Question and human rights issues already making their appearance.

3.1.1 French Support to Kurdish Cause

Due to Kurdish refugees' propaganda activities from the 1970s, many French/European intellectuals began to perceive the Turkification efforts of the Turkish State from the 1920s as the assimilation of the Kurdish community living in Turkey (Ferho 1999, pp. 21–22; Den Hond, 1999, p. 61; Rondeau, 2017, pp. 155–180). Moreover, the opening of Kurdish Institute of Paris in February 1983 (Institut Kurde de Paris, 2021) served as a catalyst for growing awareness and interest in the Kurdish political cause in France. A ban imposed by the military regime in Turkey

pp. 16–17). This is a clear sign of French aspiration to counterbalance Turkish power in the region (Örmeci 2021, p. 103).

on the teaching, printing, and the speaking of the Kurdish language following the September 12, 1980 coup also strengthened this perception.

The emergence of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) terrorism in 1984 has become a major security issue for many states, including France, which has recognized the PKK as a terrorist organization since the European Council added the group to its terrorism list in December 2001 (*Journal officiel de l'Union européenne* 2021). During Mitterrand's presidency, however, French support to the Kurdish political cause has grown. Thus, Mitterrand period of Turkish-French relations was primarily colored by the increasing disaccord between the two sides in terms of the Kurdish Question. The French first-lady of that period, Danielle Mitterrand, after witnessing the disastrous effects of the Anfal campaign organized by Saddam Hussein towards the Iraqi-Kurdish community, became one of the leading pro-Kurdish voices in the world (Joly, 2014). However, after the Gulf War, terrorist activities perpetrated by the PKK in Turkey rapidly reached the peak. Thus, Danielle Mitterrand's pro-Kurdish statements as well as her visit to PKK camps, led to a public indignation in Turkey against France (Penez, 2006, p. 99). That is why, French support for Kurdish cause and Madame Mitterrand's activities led to the emergence of the "Madame Mitterrand problem" in bilateral relations (Turan, 2017, p. 131). While Madame Mitterrand saw this as a human rights issue and defended it on the basis of humanitarian principles against a non-democratic state, Turkish political elite focused on the security-based aspect of the issue (political support to terrorism).

Due to her strong political ideals, Danielle Mitterrand also founded the "France Libertés- Fondation Danielle Mitterrand" in 1986. The state-approved non-governmental organization (NGO) provided support to all those working in favor of human rights and liberties. Starting from the 1990s, the organization specifically endeavored to protect the rights of the Kurds, Tibetans, and Armenians (Catsiapis, 2000, p. 33). In the preface of a brochure that she sent to all French parliamentarians through this institution, Madame Mitterrand even expressed her admiration to PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan (*CNN Türk*, 1998), which angered the Turkish public. Moreover, Mitterrand criticized Turkey for making the legal decision to ban the People's Democracy Party (HADEP), a pro-Kurdish political party, in 1994. In response, the Turkish government expressed that the situation was related to Turkey's internal affairs and the decision was made by the independent Turkish judiciary, thus, it should not concern France (Tetik & Düz 2019, p. 347). In addition, President Mitterrand was also a pro-Kurdish politician and a good reader of Turkey's famous Kurdish novelist Yaşar Kemal,⁴ although his pro-Kurdish stance was much more moderate compared his wife.⁵

⁴ According to famous Turkish intellectual Zülfü Livaneli (2021, p. 85), President Mitterrand was a close friend of Yaşar Kemal and the two met many times in Paris on several occasions. Livaneli also noted that (2021, p. 84) although Mitterrand himself explained – in a televised interview- his ideal as to live on the ocean shore, due to his busy political life, he had to be stuck in big cities and he said that reading Yaşar Kemal's novels made him feel like he was living on the ocean shore.

⁵ Mitterrand condemned PKK terrorism and opposed to an independent Kurdish State while he criticized human rights violations in Turkey such as the cultural rights of Kurds (*Le Monde*, 1992).

3.1.2 French Participation into the Operation Provide Comfort

Upon the beginning of the Gulf War, thousands of Kurds who were escaping from the oppression of Saddam Hussein reached Turkish borders during 1990 and 1991. Hundreds of thousands of Kurds flocked to Turkey during the war, and the Turkish government permitted the entry of these refugees due to humanitarian sensitivities. According to then-French Foreign Minister Roland Dumas, the attitude of Saddam towards Kurds should have been recognized as a “violation of human rights” and even “genocide” (Sönmezoglu, 2004, p. 316). Depending upon France’s insistence, in 1991, the UN Security Council made the decision to intervene in Iraq. Thus, this decision laid the groundwork for NATO and Western powers to use Turkey’s strategic military bases. Upon this decision, the “Operation Provide Comfort”, which consisted of 17,000 soldiers, was initiated under U.S. leadership in April 1991. After a while, a “Combined Task Force”, which was an armed military force, came to Turkey in July 1991 within the framework of “Operation Provide Comfort 2”. A total of 1,862 personnel from American, British, French, and Turkish armies participated in this military force as well as 77 aircraft that took position in İncirlik and Piriçlik airbases in Turkey. 139 French soldiers also served within this force (Oran, 1995, p. 258).

Although both France and Turkey decided to support the U.S. coalition against Saddam, this led to turbulence in the domestic politics of both countries due to widespread American skepticism. So, then-French Defence Minister Jean-Pierre Chevènement and then-Turkish Chief of General Staff Necip Torumtay resigned from their posts during this process (Turan, 2017, p. 131). In fact, the crisis was more severe in Turkey, since then-Foreign Minister Ali Bozer and then-Defence Minister Safa Giray also resigned as a reaction to President Özal’s hawkish positioning.⁶ As a result of this operation, the PKK began to settle into a safe haven created in Northern Iraq and increased its terrorist activities along the Turkish border due to the gap in authority.

3.1.3 Opening of Galatasaray University

Galatasaray University has its roots in the Galatasaray Lyceum (*Galatasaray Lisesi*), which was officially established in 1868 with the name “*Mekteb-i Sultani*”. The foundation of a Francophone higher education institution that would serve as leverage for Turkish-French relations became an important event in the early 1990s with the efforts of Galatasaray graduates. Galatasaray graduates eventually established a University Commission headed by experienced Turkish diplomat and politician Coşkun Kırca. Important Turkish scholars were involved in the Commission that worked as a pressure group to establish the university and prepared a detailed project to set up the institution. Turkey’s then-President Turgut Özal explained the project to

⁶ Özal wanted Turkey to actively join American forces during the Gulf War. However, Turkey’s contribution to the Gulf War stayed limited and Ankara only opened its military bases to American troops and employed a group of soldiers to support the American military campaign.

his French counterpart François Mitterrand during his visit to Elysée Palace in June 1991 (Galatasaray Üniversitesi 2015). Eventually, a protocol was signed between the two countries. During his visit to Turkey, French President Mitterrand himself attended a ceremony at the Galatasaray Lyceum on April 14, 1992 with his counterpart Turgut Özal as well as the two countries' then-Foreign Ministers Roland Dumas and Hikmet Çetin—to pay tribute to the opening of Galatasaray University (Galatasaray Lisesi). Galatasaray University was established in 1992 as a state university with a special status and added a new dimension to the historical educational and cultural ties between Turkey and France.

3.2 Jacques Chirac (1995–2007)

Jacques Chirac, a popular and charismatic right-wing political figure, was defeated by Mitterrand in the 1988 presidential election, but was later elected French President in 1995 over Lionel Jospin with 52.6% of votes in the second round. He had a long political career leading up to this, including the Prime Ministry (1974–1976, 1986–1988) and Paris Mayoral period (1977–1995). Although he was often condemned as a corrupt politician in France, Chirac was re-elected with a very high vote (82%) over the controversial far-right figure Jean-Marie Le Pen in 2002. In his re-election process, many leftists also supported him with the slogan of “vote for the thief, not for the fascist” (Price, 2016, p. 428). Overall, Chirac's term was the most successful period in post-Cold War Franco-Turkish relations due to French support of Turkish accession to the EU and increasing economic ties. However, the identification of 1915 Events (Armenian deportation) as the “Armenian Genocide” also took place during Chirac's term and overshadowed the positive mood of bilateral relations. Strangely, President Chirac never visited Turkey during his 12 years long Presidency term (Alkan 2017, p. 159).

3.2.1 French Support to Turkey's EU Membership

Jacques Chirac was a keen supporter of Turkey's EU membership and a brave leader for taking steps in this way,⁷ even against the will of his center-right party, Union for a Popular Movement (*Union pour un mouvement populaire*-UMP). Chirac was basically arguing that Turkey's EU membership should be assessed differently from other political problems that the country had (Vaisse, 2008, p. 15). In this regard, relations between Turkey and France accelerated starting from the early days of Chirac's presidency in 1995. France took on an especially functional role in championing Turkish membership within the EU Customs Union during 1995 and supported the official recognition of Turkey's candidate status at the 1999 Helsinki Summit (Penez, 2006,

⁷ Chirac's support to Turkey dates back to 1986; during his Prime Ministry, he had very good personal relations with Turkey's then-Prime Minister Turgut Özal (*Le Monde*, 1988).

p. 103). Before the Summit, on December 10, 1999, – thanks to Chirac’s efforts – Ankara and Paris carried out intensive telephone diplomacy, which eventually guaranteed Turkey’s candidate status (Bozkurt, 2006, p. 432). There were several events that represented the progressive aspects of Chirac’s term, including then-Turkish President Süleyman Demirel’s visit to France in February 1998, the signing of the Turkish-French Joint Action Plan for 2000 (*Hürriyet*, 1998), the close relations of the two countries’ then-Foreign Ministers İsmail Cem and Hubert Védrine’s (Örmeci, 2020a, 2020b, p. 292), and the start of full membership negotiations between Turkey and the EU on October 3, 2005. Moreover, Monceau’s study (2009, p. 107) on Turkish elites during this era (conducted between December 2004 and February 2005) showed that there was a very high support for Turkey’s EU membership (87%), the EU membership was perceived as advantageous for Ankara (91%), the EU’s image was highly positive among Turkish elites (69%), and Brussels was seen as a trustworthy actor (66.8%).

Jacques Chirac sincerely believed and openly stated that Turkey should become a member of the EU. He thought that Turkey would be an important economic power in the long term and could serve as a model for other Muslim countries in the region; so, he opposed discussions and doubts about Turkey’s Europeanness. According to Chirac, opposition to Turkey’s membership was not rational since Turkey was already in Western organizations such as the NATO and the European Council, and was adaptable to European values (Açık 2008, p. 524). Chirac also defended Ankara’s membership with the argument that “both Europeans and Turks are descendants of the Byzantine Empire” (*CNN Türk*, 2004). However, in 2004, ahead of the commencement of full membership negotiations, he admitted that Turkey’s membership process would be “long and difficult”. In his view, the negotiations could have taken over 20 years since Turkey is supposed to meet all expectations in political, economic, legal, and other areas (*Al Jazeera Türk*, 2012). Chirac’s other suggestion was to recognize Greek Cypriot Administration in the south of Cyprus as the legitimate government of the island by Ankara in order to solve the decades-old Cyprus Problem. Chirac pointed out that Turkey’s opposition to the recognition of Cyprus would lead to political and legal problems and create obstacles for Turkish accession (Turan, 2017, p. 132). Chirac also highlighted that the EU would make a mistake if it refused Turkey’s admission (Hershco, 2009).

Contrary to Chirac’s positive attitude and optimistic approach, Turkey’s full accession to the EU was not welcomed by the French public from the beginning. In 2004, according to a survey made by IPSOS, only 36% of French people were in favor of Turkish membership, whereas 56% were against the membership of a mainly Muslim country (Henley, 2004). The most emphasized objection was the “mass migration” concern; 40% of respondents thought that immigrants coming from Turkey could become involved in the employment market of the EU and would increase unemployment rates among European citizens. The other 26% said their main objection was that Turkey is mainly in Asia, while 25% cited the fact that most Turks are Muslims. So, due to public pressure coming from his party members and voters, Chirac later had to announce that “European people will have the last word on this matter, whether through parliament or through a referendum” (Caldwell, 2004). Chirac’s proposal of

a referendum was ratified in the French parliament in the same year (Alkan 2017, p. 160). This showed that Turkey's enthusiasm for the EU membership was not reciprocal, and most French people and the political elite were against Turkey becoming a full member of the Union. French opposition to Turkish accession to the EU became more visible in the coming years with Nicolas Sarkozy's rise to power.

3.2.2 French Attitude Towards 1915 Events

During the Chirac period, France actively supported Turkey's EU membership process, and also became the first major European country to recognize 1915 Events as the "Armenian Genocide" in 2001. There is a long history of popular discussions and academic debates on Armenian Genocide allegations in France. However, until 1998, no legislative action took place due to close relations with Turkey. In 1997, PS presidential candidate Lionel Jospin declared the ratification of the Armenian Genocide as one of his electoral promises (Masseret, 2001, p. 143). On May 29, 1998, upon a bill given by the Socialist parliamentary group, the French National Assembly passed the resolution that would recognize the events of 1915 as Armenian Genocide and the decision was approved by the French Senate during its session on November 7, 2000 (Taşcıoğlu, 2018, p. 134). On January 18, 2001, after almost 3 years of debate and procedural problems, the French Parliament finally approved the bill that was aiming to commemorate the victims of the 1915 Events by a specific law. The law was suggesting that "France publicly recognizes 1915 Armenian Genocide" (Masseret, 2001, p. 141). Upon the legislation, monuments recognizing the Armenian Genocide were built in some French cities (Çapanoğlu & Servantie 2015, p. 3). President Chirac approved the bill on February 9, 2003 (Önger 2017, p. 150) and finalized the French position on this issue.

The approval of Armenian Genocide allegations in France created huge reactions in Turkey. The Turkish Foreign Ministry immediately stated that this decision showed the ruthless distortion of historical facts and the defamation of the whole Turkish nation with baseless allegations; therefore, Ankara condemned and rejected this decision (Taşcıoğlu, 2018, p. 134). Moreover, upon the French approval, Ankara immediately imposed its first sanction against France in 2001. Thus, the Joint Action Plan signed between Chirac and Demirel in 1998 was suspended unilaterally by Ankara (*Hürriyet*, 2001). Additionally, the Turkish General Staff decided to cut off all military visits with Paris and to prevent French bids on military projects for observation satellites or electronic warfare (EW) systems for F-16s (Taşcıoğlu, 2018, p. 134).

Armenian Genocide issue continued to create problems in Franco-Turkish relations even after the approval of the genocide law. On the 90th anniversary of the genocide allegations, Chirac and then-Armenian President Robert Kocharyan placed flowers on the Monument of Priest Komitas, an iconic monument in Paris built to commemorate the victims of the 1915 deportation of Ottoman Armenians (DW, 2005). In 2006, a law proposal called the "Denial Law" that aimed to criminalize the

denial of Armenian Genocide with the punishment of “1 year in prison and 45 thousand euros fine” was recognized by the French Parliament; but it was not approved by the Senate and therefore, not entered into force (Çapanoğlu & Servantie 2015, p. 3). Upon harsh reactions from the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs had to announce that the Ministry does not support the law proposal adopted by the Parliament and highly appreciates Turkish-French relations (Türkiye Cumhuriyeti Avrupa Birliği Başkanlığı, 2007).

3.2.3 Chirac’s Positive Approach to Turkish Secularism

Similar to Turkish laicism, the principle of “*laïcité*” instilled a solid division between the public and the private spheres in France. Although religious and ethnic differences are visible within the private sphere, the only legitimate identity that could be visible in the public sphere is the collective/national identity of Republican France. In this context, the public sphere emerged as an impartial place where each individual has the opportunity to take part as an equal citizen. Thus, the visibility of ethnic/religious symbols in public was regarded as an indication of communitarianism and a threat to national unity in France (Tarhan, 2011, p. 20). France is still a rare democratic country where large religious symbols are forbidden, including Christian symbols, with a law adopted in 2004 that states crosses are not allowed in public schools, with the exception of higher education institutions (Sciolino, 2004).

Ahmet Kuru, a Turkish professor who extensively studied different models of secularism, concluded that, France and Turkey are two countries that have implemented an “assertive secularism” model unlike the United States (U.S.), where secular and religious groups were able to agree on a “passive secularism” model (2011, pp. 160–161). However, Kuru also noted that French assertive secularism is the product of a historical coalition between traditional enemies; leftists and Islamophobic conservatives (2011, pp. 110, 161). Moreover, as opposed to Turkish assertive secularism, which was institutionalized in a non-democratic way during the single-party era (1923–1950), French assertive secularism has always been institutional via the implementation of a multi-party democracy and has had everlasting social support. In that sense, it is not surprising that France still keeps its strong secular tradition whereas Turkey, starting from the 2010s, began to allow the use of religious symbols in all schools and public institutions both for its citizens and public servants.

In the chaotic environment that emerged after the 9/11 attacks, European societies were suddenly confronted with the adaptation problems of Muslims living within their borders, and Chirac thought that Islam could be compromised by European values. Moreover, according to Chirac, Turkey was in a position to adopt French style secularism and keep itself away from radical Islam (Dalar, 2009, p. 97). Chirac was right; similar to French courts, for many years Turkish courts prohibited the use of religious symbols like the headscarf (*türban*) in the public domain. This was a positive factor for Chirac to argue that Turkey should not have been marginalized for its cultural divergence. Chirac often argued in favor of a modern and democratic Turkey that has made its choice on the side of secularism since 1928. He even

warned about a possible “clash of civilizations” in case Turkey’s EU membership was refused on the basis of ethnic/religious arguments (Çelikel, 2019, p. 17). However, Turkey’s Islamic identity became much more apparent and stronger with the Islamist-originated conservative AK Parti and its charismatic leader Recep Tayyip Erdoğan’s rise to power in 2002–2003.⁸

3.2.4 Increasing Bilateral Economic Relations

The Chirac period was also successful in terms of developing economic relations. There is a significant amount of progress; during Chirac’s presidency, the volume of bilateral trade multiplied by 5 times and reached 10 billion euros (Turan, 2017, p. 133). In the list of countries that invest most in Turkey, France took the 4th place with a market share of 4.8%; France also became the 5th country in terms of states where Turkey invests most (Turan, 2017, p. 133). Turkey, on the other hand, rose to the 17th place (from the 22nd place) in terms of French exports around the world (Turan, 2017, p. 133). Chirac’s success in economic relations was doubtlessly related to the Turkey’s inclusion in the EU’s Customs Union starting from 1996. After this development, increasing trade relations between Turkey and European countries became a facilitating factor in the 2000s for the debut of Turkey’s integration process into the EU.

3.3 *Nicolas Sarkozy (2007–2012)*

In 2007, Nicolas Sarkozy became the sixth President of the Fifth French Republic by defeating the PS candidate Ségolène Royal with 53.1% of the votes in the second round. He had several important positions before as the Mayor of Neuilly-sur-Seine (1983–2002), the Minister of Budget (1993–1995), the Minister of the Interior (2002–2004, 2005–2007), and the Minister of Finance (2004–2004). He was the leader of the center-right UMP party and was regarded as the new charismatic leader of the French right, following Chirac. Sarkozy became the President who orchestrated France’s return to the military command of NATO in 2009, with great support from the U.S. and Turkish approval. However, Sarkozy’s view of Turkey as a country with a predominantly Muslim population that could not become an EU member was negatively perceived by Turkish media and people. Although, in practice, Sarkozy offered Turkey a model of “privileged partnership” similar to German Chancellor Angela Merkel, he was framed by the Turkish media as the worst enemy of Ankara during his presidency (Schmid, 2013, p. 14). That is why; his presidency became disastrous for Franco-Turkish relations. Sarkozy’s presidency was important because this period still characterizes the essence of Franco-Turkish relations in terms of French

⁸ AK Parti won the 2002 elections and formed a single-party government. However, due to his political ban, Erdoğan became Prime Minister in 2003.

obstruction to Turkish accession to EU as well French aspiration to counterbalance Turkey's rising regional power status.

3.3.1 French Veto on Turkey's EU Membership

Before his presidency and during his period in the Interior Ministry, Sarkozy gave clear messages about his negative attitude towards Turkish accession to the EU. He stated that "France is against a new enlargement step in case the EU's institutions are not harmonized with each other" (Açık 2008, p. 326). In his view, France, which had already been weakened as a result of the rapid enlargement process in 2004, could have been further weakened by Turkish accession to the Union (Altınbaş, 2012, p. 111). Sarkozy also became the first politician to propose a referendum for Turkish accession (Açık 2008, p. 525). In fact, it was Sarkozy's strong anti-enlargement position that forced Chirac to limit his strong support to Turkish membership. In accordance with his earlier stated views, during his presidency, Sarkozy opposed Turkish membership and indisposed warm relations between Brussels and Ankara.

During Sarkozy's presidency, Turkish membership to the EU was also utilized as a domestic policy argument in France. Sarkozy did this deliberately starting from the early days of his presidential campaign for several reasons. First of all, he sincerely believed that Turkey should not be an EU member due to cultural/civilizational differences and the geographical distance between Turkey and Europe.⁹ On September 26, 2007, Sarkozy stated, "I do not think that Turkey has a place in Europe. Because Turkey is a part of 'Asia Minor'. What I propose for Turkey is not a union, but a partnership." (Hürriyet, 2007). Sarkozy stated his thoughts on Turkey's membership to the EU in detail in his biography *Testimony (İtirafıların in Turkish)* (2006, pp. 192–194): "I oppose the views regarding accession of Turkey to the EU. The membership of a country, whose 98% land is outside European continent, who will be the most populous country of the Union in the coming 20 years, whose culture mainly carries several aspects of Islam into the EU, will cause a radical change in the Union conflicting with the political and cultural values of Europe." Secondly, as the new and young charismatic leader of the French right, Sarkozy tried to differentiate himself from Chirac, his predecessor (Turan, 2017, p. 133). Thirdly, as noted by Billion (2016, p. 76), for domestic political reasons, Sarkozy wanted to use the support of the French far-right against the rising popularity of Marine Le Pen. A possible fourth reason for Sarkozy's obstruction of Turkish membership could be the increasing French anxiety about Turkey's Islamic transformation and rediscovery of its Ottoman past. As noted by Schmid (2014, p. 3), since French intellectuals

⁹ Nicolas Sarkozy recently gave an interview for the documentary "Erdogan: le sultan qui défie l'Europe" and repeated his well-known ideas. He said that Turkey becoming an EU member is an insane idea since Turkey comes from a different civilizational family, the EU cannot become a neighbor to Syria, and Turkey would have more votes in the EU institutions than France in case Ankara becomes a full member. See: « Soirée spéciale: Erdogan: le sultan qui défie l'Europe #cdanslair 23.03.2021 », Date of Accession: 02.04.2021 from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MVtr3r0dq40>.

have always treated Turkey as a “sister republic” with its Jacobin and laic principles, Ankara, as governed by Islamist-originated AK Parti, created a competitive perception on the side of Paris.

After being elected, Sarkozy immediately blocked five important chapters¹⁰ in order to slowdown – if not to prevent – Turkish accession to the EU (Alkan 2017, p. 161). Sarkozy, along with Merkel, offered Turkey a “privileged partnership” to restructure bilateral relations. Sarkozy aimed to establish the “Union for the Mediterranean” (UfM) within the framework of privileged partnership, in order to achieve the goals stated in the Barcelona Declaration of 1995. However, when Sarkozy suggested the idea of UfM membership for Ankara, Turkish politicians and diplomats remained aloof to this idea because of his earlier negative statements and attitudes and they refused to involve in this structure at first step. France, on the other hand, emphasized the importance of Turkey for the success of the UfM and agreed to give formal guarantee in order to eliminate the concerns of Turkey (Çakmak, 2018a, 2018b, p. 221). Upon this reassurance, Turkey became a member of the UfM in 2008. However, this project could not be developed as a supplementary project to EU as expected so far (Örmeci 2016a, p. 141) due to German, Italian, and Spanish skepticism towards a French-sponsored project (Çakmak, 2018a, 2018b, pp. 518–519). Moreover, unlike Merkel who repeated several times that – due to EU’s commitment to “*pacta sunt servanda*” principle – negotiation talks should continue between Ankara and Brussels (Avundukoglu 2013), Sarkozy’s stance was perceived by the Turkish political elite, media, and public as anti-Turkish positioning. Sarkozy’s rejection of Turkish membership deeply hurt Turkish people because of intense French influence over Turkish culture and institutions. Thus, Sarkozy became the main villain for Ankara in Europe during his presidency (Schmid, 2014, p. 7).¹¹

3.3.2 Rising Tensions Over Armenian Question

Armenian Genocide discussions and Turkey’s relations with Armenia became a problematic issue during Sarkozy’s term as well. On December 22, 2011, upon the administration of a legislative bill by French parliamentarian Valérie Boyer (Önger 2017, p. 153), the French Parliament approved the “Denial Law” once again. As a reaction, Turkey summoned its Paris ambassador Tahsin Burcuoğlu for consultations. Unlike in 2006, this time the French Senate also approved the bill (Çapanoğlu & Servantie 2015, p. 3). However, with the pressure of Turkey and the initiative of some French

¹⁰ These chapters are: Agriculture and Rural Development (Chapter 11), Economic and Monetary Policy (Chapter 17), Regional Policy and Coordination of Structural Instruments (Chapter 22), Financial and Budgetary Provisions (Chapter 33), and Institutions (Chapter 34) (Turan 2017, p. 161).

¹¹ However, during his interview for the documentary “Erdogan: le sultan qui défie l’Europe”, Sarkozy claimed that he wanted to treat Turkey frankly since he loves Turkey and Turkish people. See; « Soirée spéciale: Erdogan: le sultan qui défie l’Europe #cdanslair 23.03.2021 », Date of Accession: 02.04.2021 from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MVtr3r0dq40>.

parliamentarians and senators,¹² the French Constitutional Court, in its February 28, 2012 decision, with reference to Article 6, 8, 11, and 16 of the 1789 Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen and Article 34 of the French constitution of 1958, decided to annul the Denial Law (Conseil Constitutionnelle, 2012).

Even Turkey's efforts to normalize relations with Armenia through the "football diplomacy" that was initiated by the 11th President of the Republic Abdullah Gül in the 2009–2010 period was not sufficiently credited by Paris. Although Ankara and Yerevan signed protocols on October 10, 2009 in Switzerland, Turkey's then-Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan made it clear that Turkey will not ratify the protocol until there is a political solution to the Nagorno-Karabakh Dispute between Armenia and Azerbaijan (Vinatier, 2009, p. 92). During the Sarkozy era, French support to Turkey's normalization efforts with Armenia remained weak and the reappearance of Denial Law had a negative impact on Turkish-Armenian relations as well. Moreover, Sarkozy's advisor and Minister Patrick Devedjian, who was known as an Armenian descendant and anti-Turkish political figure,¹³ became the focal point of criticism in Turkey during the Sarkozy era.

3.3.3 Ongoing Economic Relations

Due to Sarkozy's anti-Turkey rhetoric and the global economic crisis, Turkish-French economic relations had a real slowdown in 2009. Gözkaman noted that (2014) the share of French products and services in the Turkish market fell from 6 to 3%. Moreover, although there was no official embargo decision, İdiz concluded that (2013) the Turkish State did not allow French companies to compete with other companies in multi-billion dollar Turkish contracts. However, due to the ongoing EU membership process and Customs Union agreement, bilateral trade relations continued to improve and reached almost 13 million dollars at the end of Sarkozy presidency (Çapanoğlu & Servantie 2015, p. 7). Thus, after an initial fall due to Sarkozy's anti-Turkey rhetoric, Turkish-French economic relations quickly recovered.

3.3.4 The Initial Phase of Arab Spring and Libya Intervention

Beginning in late 2010, popular movements and uprisings against the dictatorial regimes in North Africa and the Middle East became widespread. These movements were influenced by the Arab Spring, and a domino effect led to revolutions, civil wars, and military interventions in some countries.¹⁴ In Libya, opposition forces initially

¹² 60 signatures were needed to apply to the Constitutional Court. Eventually, 77 parliamentarians and senators applied for the court (Önger 2017, p. 153).

¹³ Patrick Devedjian was previously an advocate for the terrorist organization ASALA (*Cumhuriyet*, 2008).

¹⁴ Most notably, the Arab Spring was resulted in a democratic revolution in Tunisia in 2011, a democratic revolution first in 2011, and a military coup eventually in 2013 in Egypt, and still ongoing civil wars in Syria and Libya.

gained success against the dictatorial Muammar Gaddafi regime and took control of many parts of the country. However, over time, Gaddafi forces retook regions that opposition groups had captured; therefore, an international coalition was created under the leadership of France and the United Kingdom – Canada and the USA also participated in this coalition afterwards. France wanted to take the lead of the operation to reclaim its grandeur in the Sahel region while ambitious Sarkozy was in power. However, the situation changed as events spiraled out of control; so, it was decided to give the responsibility to NATO.

At first, Turkey reacted to intervention and then-Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan stated that “Military intervention by NATO in Libya or any other country would be totally counter-productive; we need to give the Libyan people permission to chart their own course” (*Reuters*, 2011). However, within a short period of time, Turkish attitude towards the intervention softened and a resolution allowing the sending of Turkish troops to Libya under NATO operation was adopted in the Turkish Parliament. Thus, the decision was made to send four frigates, one submarine, an auxiliary ship, and a total of 1,000 soldiers to Libya. On the other hand, Turkey decided not to participate in any of the land operations. Ultimately, Turkey and France came to the same conclusion by involving in the NATO operation. This became a positive factor in the two countries’ cooperation during the earlier François Hollande presidency in Syria.

3.3.5 Negative Media Portrayal of Sarkozy in Turkey

During Sarkozy’s presidency, the competitive aspect of Franco-Turkish relations boomed and friendly relations transformed into open hostility. Media institutions in both countries also played an unconstructive role during this process. For instance, some French publications focused on Turkey’s Islamic transformation and increasing influence over Muslim countries as a negative factor and a barrier for democratization with the slogan of the “birth of a new Ottoman Empire” or “neo-Ottomanism” (Karababa, 2013; Marchand, 2011), while, in fact, Turkish democracy was living its best days between 1999 and 2013. Turkish press also treated Sarkozy and France as the only problem in Turkish-EU relations. The negative effect of the media during this era was not exaggerated; for instance, one of the most popular Turkish newspapers of that time, *Vatan*, published even a Hitler-looking Sarkozy picture on December 4, 2009, on its front page (Örmeci, 2016a, 2016b, p. 547). In 2011, Melih Gökçek, then-Mayor of Ankara, was chewing gum as he saw off Nicolas Sarkozy at the end of his visit to Turkey for the G-20 meeting. Gökçek said; he did so in retaliation to a similar move made by the French President when he arrived to the protocol at the Ankara Esenboğa Airport (RFI, 2011). This issue was highly exaggerated by the Turkish media in order to condemn Sarkozy. The French press on the other hand, has labeled Erdoğan as the “new Sultan of Turkey” (Perrier, 2012a, 2012b), although he won all the elections entered in a democratic way and was the one who started accession talks.

3.4 *François Hollande (2012–2017)*

Long-serving PS politician François Hollande who was a member of the parliament from Corrèze (1988–1993, 1997–2012), the Mayor of Tulle (2001–2008), and the President of the General Council of Corrèze (2008–2012) became the seventh French President in 2012. For some analysts, the incumbent right-wing President Nicolas Sarkozy was the favored candidate over “*Monsieur Normal*”, the nickname for charisma-lacking Hollande. However, he defeated Sarkozy in the second round with 51.6% of the votes. Overall, Hollande was successful in revitalizing Turkish-EU relations in his early tenure in the office. However, the terrible consequences of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIS) terrorism in Syria and France, Turkey’s stagnation in terms of democratization, and heated debates about the Armenian Question all caused the Franco-Turkish relations to become problematic once again in the subsequent years.

3.4.1 **France’s Softening Positioning on Turkey’s EU Membership**

Unlike Sarkozy, François Hollande and his party PS did not oppose Turkey’s EU membership theoretically and developed a “conditionality” approach; that is to say, if Ankara adopts European values and norms, it could become a full member of the club (Schmid, 2013, p. 15). Hollande, after coming to power, in order to revitalize the Turkey’s EU accession process, lifted the French blockage on two chapters.¹⁵ Hollande wanted to encourage Turkey to make democratic reforms after the 2013 Gezi Park protests, which created a negative image for Ankara in the Occidental world. He also visited Turkey in January 2014 and gave positive messages for Turkish accession to the EU (Pineau, 2014). That was the first presidential visit from France after 22 years.¹⁶ However, although Hollande tried to regenerate Turkish accession to the EU with the idea of directing the Turkish government towards democratic reforms, Turkey’s democratic slowdown and regression was accelerated after 2013 and especially after the failed coup attempt in 2016.

3.4.2 **Heated Debates Over 1915 Events**

François Hollande, during his electoral campaign, promised to revitalize the Denial Law. Although he did not accomplish that, Hollande asked Turkey to recognize 1915 Events as “genocide” (*Le Monde*, 2014), which resulted in the rising tension between two capitals once again on this issue. President Hollande also visited Armenia in

¹⁵ First, the lifting of French veto on Regional Policy and Coordination of Structural Instruments chapter (Chapter 22) on November 5, 2013 and then the same on Economic and Monetary Policy chapter (Chapter 17) on December 14, 2015 (Alkan 2017, p. 162).

¹⁶ The previous official visit was made by Mitterrand in 1992. Sarkozy’s short visit in February 2011 was for the G-20 meeting and not an official state visit to Turkey.

2015 for the 100th anniversary of the 1915 Events and participated in the historic ceremony. However, in 2016, the French Constitutional Court made the decision to differentiate the Holocaust from the 1915 Events by annulling the last subparagraph of section 2 of the Article 173¹⁷ and thus, prevented further escalation of the crisis.

3.4.3 Syrian Civil War and the Kurdish Question

After the beginning of the Syrian civil war in 2011, both Turkey and France supported oppositional groups against the dictatorial Ba'athist (Bashar al-Assad) regime. However, in 2014, with the emergence and the strengthening of the ISIS (DAESH), a radical Islamist terrorist organization, France began to perceive ISIS as a more vital threat, whereas Turkey maintained the Assad regime as its main target until the mid-2015. Accordingly, in September 2014, 40 countries gathered in Paris to discuss strategies to counteract ISIS. French President François Hollande emphasized that ISIS was a global threat and a global resistance would be needed against it. Although ten Arab countries took part in the coalition to fight ISIS, Turkey did not join this group (*BBC Türkçe*, 2014). Moreover, starting from the “Charlie Hébdö Incident” in January 2015, ISIS organized a series of terrorist attacks that occurred in France, which increased public anger towards Turkey’s Syria policy that was thought to be empowering ISIS. That is why; Turkey’s then-Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu had a cold reception by Hollande in the historic march against ISIS in Paris in January 2015 (Örmeci, 2016a, 2016b, pp. 551–552). ISIS targeted Turkey in 2015 and 2016 as well, and consequently, Turkish foreign policy towards Syria also began to change starting from mid-2015. The Turkish military had to organize military operations to defend its border from ISIS and the People’s Defense Units (PYD-YPG) militants while Ankara continued to support moderate rebel groups such as the Free Syrian Army against the Assad regime. In the meantime, Turkey began to cooperate with Russia and Iran in Syria in order to resolve the issues there.

At the beginning of 2016, then-French Defense Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian’s visit to Turkey was seen as a positive step towards strengthening bilateral relations. Le Drian’s numerous meetings proved that both Turkey and France have a common position in the struggle against ISIS (Örmeci, 2016a, 2016b, p. 553). However, in the coming days, France’s close relations with the PYD/YPG, a branch of PKK, created a reaction against Paris in Turkey. Turkey considers the PYD/YPG a terrorist group, while many Western states, including the U.S. and France, support them based on their mutual struggle against ISIS. President Hollande even received PYD/YPG officials in military uniforms at the Elysée Palace in 2015 (Dağdelen & Yılmaz 2020, p. 18). In June 2016, the confirmation of French ground assistance to Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces-SDF (a new name created by the U.S. to soften Turkish reactions towards PYD/YPG) against ISIS, came as the Syrian government warplanes

¹⁷ “Punishing the negation of certain crimes, when this negation constitutes an incitement to violence or hate in reference to the presumed race, color, religion, descent or national origin, including if these crimes were not part of a court conviction.” (Conseil Constitutionnelle, 2017).

intensified its airstrikes on rebel-held districts of Aleppo. The French news agency *AFP* reported that French Special Forces were not participating in the combat in Manbij and their role was restricted to advisory and training (VOA, 2016).

In addition, the mysterious assassination of three PKK members in Paris, in early 2013, also created intense criticism between two countries' media institutions regarding the Kurdish Question during the early Hollande period. Some people in France blamed the Turkish National Intelligence Agency (MİT) for the assassination, and the French courts even issued an arrest warrant in 2014 for four MİT officials (Çakır, 2014). Nevertheless, Turkish politicians presented it as an internal feud within the PKK (*BBC Türkçe*, 2013).

3.4.4 Charlie Hébdó Incident and Terrorist Attacks in France

Horrible acts committed by ISIS in France, starting with the attack on *Charlie Hébdó* magazine in Paris on January 7, 2015, continued with simultaneous attacks in many places on November 13, 2015. In July 2016, another terrifying event took place in Nice. The case that drew Muslims' reactions was a published cartoon of Prophet Mohammed by the satirical magazine *Charlie Hébdó*, known for its provocative style. This attack led to the death of 12 French citizens and the emergence of a terrifying mood in France about the integration of Muslims living in this country. A research conducted by IPSOS/Sopra-Steria proved that the majority of French people (53%) began to feel themselves at war against terrorism and a slight majority (51%) began to feel that Islam is incompatible with French values (*Le Monde*, 2015) after the *Charlie Hébdó* incident.

After the attacks, some anti-Muslim groups in France and Europe began to attack Islam and attributed the concept of terrorism to the Muslim world. Upon these accusations, Turkish President Erdoğan stated that: "Our religion does not allow terrorism; there is no place for terror in Islam. And nobody has the right to attribute existing terrorist attacks to Muslims by exploiting our religion. The Pope also condemns this magazine, which is famous for its provocative publications. Freedom of thought also has a limit. This situation is called terror because it intervenes in someone else's freedom zone." (*Sputnik Türkiye*, 2015). Erdoğan also accused Western states of hypocrisy and Islamophobia for their Syria policy as well as reactions against Muslims after the ISIS attacks (Euractiv, 2015). Although François Hollande made prudent explanations after the attacks on Islam by saying that "Islam is compatible with democracy" and "It is Muslims who are the first victims of fanaticism, fundamentalism, and intolerance" (*DW*, 2015), he later had to use the term "Islamic terrorism" for the first time (Örmeci & Bezmez 2019, p. 144). Moreover, two countries' different civilizational backgrounds and sociocultural differences became more apparent after the ISIS attacks, and thus, President Hollande's earlier efforts to revitalize Turkey's EU membership process failed. During this process, while many French intellectuals focused on the barbaric actions of ISIS, the Turkish public focused on the irresponsible behavior of the *Charlie Hébdó* magazine that provoked Muslims and created a comfortable ground for radical groups and terrorists.

3.4.5 Turkey-EU Migrants Deal

One of the most serious issues in Turkey-EU relations during the Hollande period became the “refugee problem” due to the ongoing Syrian civil war, which forced millions of Syrians to flee their country. EU officials soon began to point out that Turkey is responsible for the routing of Syrian refugees towards Europe; so, the borders of Turkey-EU should be strictly controlled in order to prevent illegal movements of migrants. On the other hand, Turkey did not want to take full responsibility for refugees by itself. Thus, an agreement was reached in early 2016 between two sides on the basis of the EU giving financial support to Turkey (6 million euros in two tranches) and taking some of the refugees in return to Turkey’s strict border controls and keeping millions of refugees on its soil (Piskorska, 2019). So, on March 18, 2016, an agreement was made with the principle of every – irregular – Syrian migrant to be taken back to Turkey from the Aegean islands, in return the EU would start to resettle another – regular – Syrian from Turkey within the scope of “1 for 1 formula” (Republic of Turkey Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2016).

In this context, François Hollande supported Turkey in regards with the burden sharing and highlighted that France was ready to take in 24,000 refugees as part of the EU plans to welcome more than 100,000 in the next two years. Hollande pointed out that France was ready to take 1,000 refugees immediately from among those flooding into Germany to show solidarity with its closest European partner (Reuters, 2015). However, as of October 2016, France only received about 14,000 applications for asylum from Syrian refugees, much lower than the previous pledge (Cockcroft & Provox 2017, p. 12). The presidential election also played a serious role in this unfulfilled pledge because the government and citizens of France seemed to be reluctant to push for any significant progress on a controversial topic such as immigration (Cockcroft & Provox 2017, p. 24). On the other hand, Turkish economic and political stability was negatively affected by almost four million Syrian refugees escaping to Turkey during this process and President Erdoğan began to criticize the EU for not carrying out its promises in relation to financial help for Syrian migrants. Although the migrant deal prevented a breakdown in Turkey-EU relations, it also made relations more transactional than membership-oriented.

3.5 Emmanuel Macron (2017)

The young Minister of the Economy, Industry, and Digital Affairs of François Hollande from the PS period of 2014–2016, Emmanuel Macron, surprisingly became the new President of France in 2017. Macron emerged as the fresh blood of French politics at a time when President Hollande’s popularity was very low and the far-right leader Marine Le Pen appeared as the only alternative. So, without a political party endorsement, only with the support of his newly established “*En Marche!*” movement, Macron became the eighth President of France with 66.1% of the votes against Marine Le Pen in the second round (Örmeci & Bezmez 2019, p. 206). Although

during his presidency Macron had to face many difficulties including the *Gilets Jaunes* (Yellow Vests) protests and the COVID-19 pandemic, he was reelected in the 2022 French presidential election. However, Macron's presidency, which started positively in terms of Franco-Turkish relations, became more conflictual in the coming years due to increasing disagreements between two countries in some strategic issues as well as frequent polemics between leaders. Thus, although it is still not conflictual as the Sarkozy period, the relationship between Turkey and France during Macron era has not developed yet as it was hoped and the competition perception between two countries increased in the Eastern Mediterranean, Libya, Syria, Balkans, and Africa.

3.5.1 French Opposition to Turkey's EU Membership

Unlike his predecessor François Hollande, Emmanuel Macron did not try to revitalize Turkey's EU accession process. Instead, during Erdoğan's official visit to Paris in January 2018, he offered Ankara a kind of "partnership" and "cooperation" due to Turkey's poor democratic standards (Semo, 2018). Thus, Macron closed the door for Brussels to Ankara by openly stating that talking about the opening of new chapters in Turkey's EU accession process will be "hypocrisy" (DW, 2018b). This was a disappointment for Ankara since Turkey expected more support from its Western allies after the failed coup attempt in 2016. Thus, Macron chose the "Sarkozy path" instead of the "Hollande path" and Turkey's democratic regression became a pretext for the young French President. The transformation of Turkey-EU relations into a transactional relationship with the Syrian Migrants Deal also served as a catalyst in this negative trend. However, it should be added that French and in general European attitude towards Turkey might change if the Turkish government returns to its reformist agenda as in the early 2000s.

3.5.2 Continuing Disagreements Over PYD/YPG

In the Hollande period, France already decided to expand its cooperation with the PYD/YPG in Syria against the danger of ISIS and the brutality of the Assad regime. In the Macron period as well, France kept its support to Kurdish militants in Syria and this continued to create a problem between two capitals. Macron, similar to Hollande, invited the representatives of SDF to the Elysée Palace and hosted a delegation in 2018. Macron claimed that the SDF had "no operational link with the PKK", adding that "a dialogue could be established between the SDF and Turkey with the help of France and the international community" (*Yeni Şafak*, 2018). Moreover, the French Parliament reiterated its support to YPG after Turkey's "Operation Peace Spring", which was a cross-border military operation that was initiated on October 9, 2019 (*Euronews*, 2019). Thus, both the French Presidency and the French Assembly took a negative stance towards Turkey's military operations, which eventually faded

the earlier hopes for the success of Franco-Turkish relations during the Macron presidency.

3.5.3 Negative Football Diplomacy

Turkish and French national football teams were in the same group for the EURO 2020 qualifiers. Since football is a crucial part of social life in Turkey and France was the last world champion, two matches on the group stage drew a lot of attention from the international media. In the first match played on June 8, 2019 in Konya, the Turkish team won 2-0 and defeated the world champion. However, the match turned into a political scandal when some Turkish fans booed the French national anthem “*La Marseillaise*” during the ceremony prior to the match. Then-French Consul General in Istanbul Bertrand Buchwalter and President Macron condemned this event and polemics started between two countries’ officials (Örmeci, 2021, pp. 99–100). Although the second match was played in a peaceful atmosphere at Stade de France on October 14, 2019 and two teams drew 1-1, the negative effects of the first match were not forgotten easily.

3.5.4 Nagorno-Karabakh Dispute

The Nagorno-Karabakh Dispute between Armenia and Azerbaijan mainly concerns regional countries such as Turkey, Iran, and Russia as well as the EU and the U.S. in terms of international interests (Pehlivan, 2016, p. 122). In this regard, Turkey has always supported Azerbaijan in the Nagorno-Karabakh Dispute within the framework of its Caucasus and Central Asia policy as well as the UN Security Council decisions. When Azerbaijan declared its independence on August 30, 1991, Turkey became the first country to officially recognize the new Turkic state. Turkish support for Azerbaijan continued and accelerated in the 2010s and the two countries extended their cooperation to the fields of energy (the completion of TANAP, a new natural gas pipeline project) and defence industry as well (Turkish military’s training of Azerbaijani soldiers and Turkish arm sales to Baku).

Conflicts between Azerbaijan and Armenia over the territory of Nagorno-Karabakh continued until the end of the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh War (Second Karabakh War), which finished with a ceasefire agreement signed between two parties. However, this problem, starting from the early 1990s, negatively affected Franco-Turkish relations due to two countries’ opposing policies. While Turkey has always reiterated its support to Azerbaijan,¹⁸ France has always been considered as a supporter of the Armenian cause even against international law. France, together with Russia and the U.S., also took part in the OSCE Minsk Group, which has always stayed ineffective for the solution of the problem. However, with the success of

¹⁸ Turkish Vice President Fuat Oktay during the war even stated that Ankara would not hesitate to send troops if such a request were made by Baku (*Reuters*, 2020a, 2020b).

Azerbaijani forces on the field (Turkish military support and arm sales to Azerbaijan was also considered as a crucial factor in the success of Baku), the agreement of November 10, 2020 finalized the Azerbaijani victory and Armenian forces withdrew from the occupied territories. On the other hand, Article 5 of the agreement authorized the Turkish Armed Forces -together with the Russian Army – “at the center of peacekeeping”. In that sense, the agreement paved the way for Turkish and Russian soldiers to observe whether the ceasefire conditions were carried out or not thanks to “technological facilities and unmanned aerial vehicles” (*BBC*, 2020a, 2020b, 2020c).

While the Azerbaijan victory was celebrated in Turkey, French President Macron criticized Turkey’s Karabakh policy. He said that Turkey’s “warlike” rhetoric that was encouraging Azerbaijan for reconquering Nagorno-Karabakh was unacceptable, though he added that he had no proof at this stage of direct Turkish involvement. He said, “I have noted Turkey’s political declarations (in favor of Azerbaijan), which I think are inconsiderate and dangerous” (*Reuters*, 2020a, 2020b). Furthermore, despite the fact that Nagorno-Karabakh is within the Azerbaijani territory according to the UN decisions and previously President Macron expressed his support for Azerbaijan’s territorial integrity (Cherni, 2020), the French National Assembly approved a resolution calling on the government to recognize Nagorno-Karabakh as a “republic”. France’s adoption of this resolution drew heavy criticism from both Ankara and Baku for ignoring the UN decisions and disrespecting international law (*Daily Sabah*, 2020).

3.5.5 Increasing Polarization Over the Eastern Mediterranean and Relations with Greece and Cyprus

While Turkey attributes great importance to Eastern Mediterranean in terms of its economic needs, it also aims to have a political superiority vis-à-vis other riparian countries in the region. Due to the fact that Turkey has the longest coastline with a length of 1,870 km in the Eastern Mediterranean, it focuses on protecting its regional status and justifying its authority before international law. Moreover, the Eastern Mediterranean is also vital for Turkey in terms of the sovereignty rights of Turkish Cypriots, economic exclusive zones, and the continental shelf as well as the rich energy resources in the region. In 2019, during the negotiations among the EU Ministers in Luxembourg, there was concern about Turkey’s drilling operations for hydrocarbons around the “Cyprus economic zone” and Turkey was requested to give up its drilling operations as soon as possible due to its inconsistency with international law (*DW*, 2019).

In reshaping the geopolitical environment, France is interested in the Eastern Mediterranean and rearranging the regional balance of power there in its favor. Accordingly, France tries to counterbalance Turkey’s influence by engaging in close relations with Cyprus, Greece, and Israel while also trying to involve the EU in this region with military initiatives such as the PESCO (Permanent Structured Cooperation) and the EI2 (European Intervention Initiative) (Örmeci, 2021, pp. 102–103). Another dimension of France’s Eastern Mediterranean policy is the protection of the

rights of French energy giant TOTAL and making strategic gains in the region such as the right to use Evangelos Florakis Naval Base in Cyprus (Örmeci, 2021, pp. 103, 105). On one hand, France supports the Greek and Greek Cypriot governments in terms of economic exclusive zones; on the other hand, it encourages quasi-legitimate groups in the region (Khalifa Haftar forces) against Turkey who supports Libya's legitimate government within the framework of the UN resolutions (Lika, 2020, p. 7). Thanks to the Defense Cooperation Agreement signed in 2017, France and Cyprus expanded their military partnerships as well, and France was granted the right to protect ships engaging in drilling activities in the Eastern Mediterranean (Kısacık & Erenel, 2019, p. 68).

France's anti-Turkey positioning has become increasingly stronger in the Eastern Mediterranean during the Macron period. On June 14, 2019, drilling activities, which were carried out in accordance with exclusive economic zone (EEZ) agreement between Turkey and the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC), a de facto state only recognized by Turkey, were described as "illegal" at the Sixth Summit of EU Member Southern European Countries (Med7). Thus, it was decided that the EU would do "appropriate action" against it (Lika, 2020, p. 10). On February 21, 2020, within the scope of the Defense Cooperation Agreement signed with Cyprus, France anchored the aircraft carrier called Charles de Gaulle at the Limassol Port after a simulated military operation with the Cyprus Army (DW, 2020). Another serious dispute between Turkey and France was the "Courbet incident". In 2020, France announced that Turkish warships flashed their radar lights three times and prevented the Courbet warship, which was operating within the framework of NATO's Sea Guardian mission in the Eastern Mediterranean, from inspecting a cargo ship. On the other hand, Turkey denied the accusations and shared information and documents proving the legitimacy of Turkey about the case with NATO. Eventually, France was withdrawn from NATO's Sea Guardian mission as a response to this.

The strategic partnership between France and Greece was also accelerated in 2020. In August 2020, the Turkish Navy announced a new NAVTEX (Navigational Telex) for the Oruç Reis seismic research vessel in the Eastern Mediterranean and extended its operations until 27 October 2020. French President Emmanuel Macron reacted to this NAVTEX decision and announced that France could send naval ships to the region to support Greece (BBC, 2020a, 2020b, 2020c). After that, France and Greece organized a joint military exercise in the area that covers Turkey's declared NAVTEX. Furthermore, in 2021, Greece has signed a 2.3 billion euro deal with France to purchase 18 Rafale fighter jets as tensions have been growing with Turkey. Greek Defense Minister Nikos Panagiotopoulos pointed out that the acquisition of fighter jets "is a milestone in the defense cooperation and relations between Greece and France", adding the Greek Air Force has been significantly strengthened (AA, 2021). Most recently, two countries signed a pact and Greece has committed to buy three frigates from France's Naval Group with weaponry supplied by MBDA Company in a potential \$3.5 billion deal (Sprengrer, 2021).

3.5.6 Libyan Civil War

In recent years, the Libyan civil war has become one of the most critical issues triggering negative relations between France and Turkey. Ankara supported the UN-recognized “Government of National Accord” by Fayeze al-Sarraj (backed by the Muslim Brotherhood movement) and two countries signed an agreement for the delimitation of the Eastern Mediterranean in late 2019. However, Paris backed General Khalifa Haftar’s forces. As Turkey has aimed to protect its rights guaranteed by the international law in the Mediterranean, it signed a deal with Libya, specifying the delimitation of the maritime jurisdiction of both countries and blocking any *fait accompli* access by other regional states. Furthermore, the maritime delimitation agreement recognized Turkey’s rights in its exclusive economic zone (EEZ) extending into the southeast of the island of Crete. Pursuant to the agreement, Turkey also sent military troops to Libya. Thus, the specific part of the western border of Turkey’s maritime jurisdiction areas in the Eastern Mediterranean was determined. Moreover, it was prevented to incarcerate Turkey in 41 thousand square kilometers in the Mediterranean by the “Sevilla Map” (İnat et al., 2020, p. 14). In terms of Turkey’s Libya policy, Macron strongly criticized the Turkish position and claimed that Turkey did not act in conformity with the Berlin Conference decisions stating that “things happening in Libya are Turkey’s historical and criminal responsibility” (Örmeci, 2021, p. 99).

According to Güney (2020, pp. 140–141), French foreign policy towards Libya was determined by French Foreign Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian. The ideological reason of French foreign policy towards Libya is to deal with radical Islam; so, France’s top priority in North Africa is to block radical Islam and the threats that could be seen indirectly over Europe. Therefore, France sometimes carried out air operations against some radical groups fighting with Haftar and also helped Haftar to move forward in the area (BBC, 2020a, 2020b, 2020c). In addition to that, for France, the easiest way to reach central Africa is through Libya. Moreover, France wants to reach and control the gas reserves in the Eastern Mediterranean and the Libyan oil via the initiatives of its energy company TOTAL (Aslan, 2020). In the spring of 2016, especially after Haftar’s control of the oil fields in Libya, Le Drian had frequently visited Haftar. According to data from the French National Institute of Statistics (INSEE), oil exports from Libya to France increased by almost 2.5 times compared to 2014 in 2018 (AA, 2020a, 2020b, 2020c). After the emergence of a new national unity government Libya in early 2021, it is hoped that Turkey and France could collaborate for the stability of Libya and the region in general by renouncing their competitive approaches.

3.5.7 Controversies About French Scholars’ Turkish Proficiency

After the French government decided to require French proficiency from Turkish imams working in France (sent by Turkey’s Directorate of Religious Affairs) and from Turkish instructors working in primary and secondary education institutions as part

of EILE (*Enseignements internationaux de langues étrangères*) regulation, Turkey's Higher Education Board (YÖK) began to implement a new procedure and decided to ask for B2 level Turkish proficiency from French scholars working at Galatasaray University (*Independent Türkçe*, 2021). As the curriculum of Galatasaray University is almost entirely in French, the French scholars in Turkey felt that placing a linguistic requirement on them, with little time to comply, was a politically motivated decision. A Turkish scholar from the University of Strasbourg, Samim Akgönül, claims that this is part of a negative trend for university autonomy in Turkey in recent years and this decision a deliberate retaliation against to French government.¹⁹ However, this decision was not based on reciprocity since the French government's decision is for primary and secondary education, whereas the Turkish decision is for higher education. Another Turkish professor from France, Ahmet İnel on the other hand asserts that this is an effort to alienate Turkey from the Occidental world and YÖK's decision is based on political motives.²⁰ However, after the teleconference meeting between two countries' Presidents in early March 2021, YÖK decided to annul this procedure and the crisis was solved.

3.5.8 Rising Competition in Some Regions

Starting from the early 2000s, Turkish and French companies' interests in some regions (Balkans, Africa, and the Middle East) began separating. This divide soon turned into a state-based competition since most companies are also backed by their governments. For instance, after Macron's statements²¹ regarding European, Turkish, and Russian competition in the Balkans, the spokesperson for Turkish Foreign Ministry Hami Aksoy stated that (*TRT Français*, 2018) transforming Balkans "into a zone of influence between competing forces is not constructive idea". After Macron's speech, in February 2018, Brussels began to implement the strategy of "the rapid integration of the Western Balkan countries to the EU". In the same year, the EU Commission recommended starting accession negotiations with Macedonia and Albania (Ercan 2018, p. 8). Although negotiations started in 2018, they were postponed because of the French veto on the membership of these countries. The French government is justifying its veto for EU accession talks with North Macedonia and Albania on the basis of the necessity to reform accession procedures before any new countries can join. This could be based on the observation that the EU had "bad experiences" with the recent EU enlargement towards Central and Eastern Europe. On the other hand, Turkey and Turkish companies try to be active in the Balkans via Muslim/Turkic people and Turkey's Ottoman past.

¹⁹ "Galatasaray Üniversitesi Türk dış politikasının kurbanı mı olacak? - Prof Samim Akgönül", Date of Accession: 11.04.2021 from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UDCIRUy9r9Q>.

²⁰ "Galatasaray Üniversitesi'nde Türkçe zorunluluğu kararını Prof. Dr. Ahmet İnel değerlendiriyor", Date of Accession: 11.04.2021 from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9PsvqAb4DF8>.

²¹ Macron said, "I don't want a Balkans that turns toward Turkey or Russia" (*Euractiv*, 2018).

Another zone of influence between Turkey and France is Africa. Most notably, Algeria is one of the largest investment areas for French companies. France is the largest exporter to Algeria after China, earning \$3.8 billion in revenue in 2019. On the other hand, Turkey's 2019 exports to Algeria totaled a paltry \$5.1 million, placing Turkey in the 76th position among Algeria's import markets. However, in 2020, President Erdoğan announced his ambitious goal to raise bilateral trade between Turkey and Algeria to \$5 billion and pushed for a free trade agreement (The Turkey Analyst 2020). Additionally, Turkey's recent diplomatic progress in Niger has put a chink in the armor of France's Sahel redoubt. In a significant move for advancement, Turkey and Niger signed several agreements on economic and defense cooperation in 2021. The economic agreements build on the breakthrough January 2020 deal between Ankara and Niamey that allow Turkey's General Directorate of Mineral Research and Exploration to conduct exploration and mining operations. Due to the fact that France generates three-quarters of its electricity from nuclear power and one-third of the uranium is mined in Niger by the French company Areva, Turkey's entrance into Niger's mining industry had a serious impact on Turkey-French competition in the economic area (The Turkey Analyst 2020). What is more, another sub-Saharan Africa country where Turkish investments are mostly concentrated is Nigeria. The total trade volume of Turkey and Nigeria reached \$2.3 billion in 2019. Over 40 Turkish companies operate in Nigeria, with more than 500 Turkish and more than 2,500 Nigerians are employed in these companies (AA, 2020a, 2020b, 2020c). Besides Turkey, the French government also planned to set aside about one billion euros to invest in Nigeria's oil and gas industry to strengthen its economic relations with Africa (Premium Times, 2017). Thus, it could be stated that Turkey has tried to be more active in the traditional French markets in Africa in recent years, which further increases the competition perception between the two states.

In the Middle East as well, two countries could sometimes engage in a conflictual relationship in terms of commercial interests and political influence. For instance, following President Macron's ostentatious visit to Lebanon after the huge explosion at the Beirut Port in August 2020, Turkish President Erdoğan accused Macron of "colonialism" (Le Point, 2020). Moreover, unusually, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and France have been sharing a common foreign goal in recent years, which is the "opposition to Turkey". France's support of the UAE, which helped the paramilitary groups loyal to General Khalifa Haftar in Libya and signed various agreements with this country, raised the tension between Paris and Ankara. France considers the UAE an important resource for investment, trade, and energy. France sold a total of 4.7 billion euros of weapons to the UAE between 2010 and 2019; 1.5 billion euros of that transaction took place in 2019 (AA, 2020a, 2020b, 2020c). On the other hand, the UAE hosts France's first permanent military base in the Gulf. The Syrian issue has also been one of the disputed areas between two countries in the Middle East. Macron emphasized that he did not see a legitimate successor to replace Syrian President Bashar al-Assad; in addition, Assad's departure was no longer even a prerequisite for France to give up the civil war in Syria (Ozan, 2018). However, Turkey has always advocated the idea of overthrowing the Assad government, in

contrast to France; so, Ankara has continued to support the opposing groups such as the Free Syrian Army.

3.5.9 Battle of Words Between Leaders

In recent years, the Presidents of the two countries have started to engage in frequent quarrels with each other by forgoing traditional diplomatic language. For instance, Turkish President Erdoğan advised Macron to have his brain checked by doctors after Macron's statement about "the brain death of NATO" in one of his interviews (Örmeci, 2021, p. 98). The Turkish Minister of Foreign Affairs Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu also criticized France for supplying Libyan opposition leader Khalifa Haftar with weapons, and used the term "coup-plotters and pirates" for Haftar and his partisans (QHA, 2020). Apart from that, tensions have again been rising between countries because of President Emmanuel Macron's most recent speech accusing the Turkish government of intervening in the next year's French presidential election (VOA, 2021). However, despite of frequent quarrels in 2020, Turkey recently appointed Ali Onaner, President Macron's classmate from ENA (*Ecole Nationale d'Administration*), as its new Paris ambassador to show Ankara's willingness to improve relations with Paris during the Macron era (Morin 2021).²²

3.5.10 Negative Media Attitude in Both Countries' Towards Leaders

Similar to the Sarkozy period, due to Macron's anti-enlargement position and French counterbalancing policies against Turkey, Turkish media presents the young French president often in a negative way. For instance, in many Turkish publications, Macron is labeled as the "little Napoléon" in a critical way (Çetin, 2020; Irtak, 2020). On the other hand, in 2018, French magazine *Le Point* received criticisms from President Erdoğan's supporters in France after labeling him as "The Dictator" on its front cover (*Le Point*, 2018). French President Macron condemned the protests against the magazine. He even wrote on his Twitter account "It is utterly unacceptable that posters of *Le Point* should be withdrawn from newspaper kiosks on the grounds that they displease the enemies of freedom, in France or abroad" (DW, 2018a). Likewise, the French press also presents Turkey as an actor that tries to harm NATO interests (Lasserre, 2020; Guibert & Stroobants 2020). All in all, the media has been a serious propaganda tool that fans the flames among leaders and creates mutual negative perceptions in each society.

²² This could be also interpreted as Turkey's firm belief in the continuation of Macron presidency until 2027. President Macron was reelected in April 2022 for 5 more years.

3.5.11 Common Attitude after Russia-Ukraine War

After the start of the Russia-Ukraine War in February 2022, both France and Turkey, as NATO members, emphasized the “territorial integrity of Ukraine” and requested President Putin to stop the war. This may be seen as a development that brought the parties on a common ground after a long time. The statements of French President Macron on planning to start a joint operation with Turkey and Greece to evacuate 150,000 civilians who were under very difficult conditions in the Mariupol, which is under the blockade of Russian troops, brought the possibility of a new revival in Turkey-France relations (*WDM News*, 2022). In the meeting within the framework of the NATO Summit, the decision in the way that Turkey and France would provide the humanitarian aid and make evacuation operation for Ukrainian people shows that a moderate and common process has been started in the Paris-Ankara axis, unlike the old conflict periods, thanks to this war. According to Ali Onaner, Paris Ambassador of Turkey, Erdoğan and Macron are only leaders who can meet with both Ukrainian President Zelensky and Russian President Putin, as well as these two leaders, as NATO members, lead diplomatically to end the war (*BBC Türkçe*, 2022), so this peacemaking process has made Turkish-French relations gain momentum.

4 Conclusion

This paper tried to analyze Franco-Turkish relations in the post-Cold War era by focusing on the most important issues throughout the terms of each French President. The paper basically argued that post-Cold War Turkish-French relations are characterized by two different trends. The first trend was the pursuit of further integration between the two countries (e.g. increasing political, economic, cultural ties as well as the Turkish accession to the EU) and was prominent throughout the presidencies of Jacques Chirac and François Hollande. The second trend was mounting French anxiety and counterbalancing efforts against Turkey’s transformation into a regional power that would be prouder of its Islamic past and characteristics, and was prominent during the presidency of Nicolas Sarkozy and continues to be with Emmanuel Macron. As shown by many cases, the emergence of competition in commercial interests and zones of influence also fueled the competitive feelings on both sides. However, it is worthy to note that even when competitive aspects of the relationship became dominant, economic relations between Turkey and France continued to develop. Apart from a short period during the Sarkozy era, bilateral relations have never been at risk of breaking down.

Finally, it should be stated that Turkish-French ties in different spheres are still considerably strong and there should not be a risk of relations breaking down in the foreseeable future. However, if the perception of competition continues to dominate the scene, there could be new crises taking place between the two countries. In order to prevent such crises, two countries should increase their communication channels and should cooperate rather than compete in diplomacy and economy. Increasing

cultural and social ties will also positively affect Franco-Turkish relations. It must never be forgotten that Turkish-French relations are rooted and strong and will always continue despite of temporary disagreements and problems.

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