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# **The French Military's Perception of the Turkish Military and Turkey's Expansion in the Eastern Mediterranean**

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# Executive Summary

In the summer of 2020, the Central and Eastern Mediterranean became the center of unusual tensions between France and Turkey. Given that these tensions were also military, which is uncommon for the two countries, the perception that the French military has of Turkey's army and its doctrine is particularly relevant to address. From the interviews that were conducted with French officers, it appears that for the French military, 2016 and 2020 are two milestones in the evolution of both Turkish political and military Turkish attitudes. From 2016 onwards, the Syrian and Libyan conflicts uncovered diverging interests between France and Turkey, with military implications for France. In the same year, Turkish military behavior in the Eastern Mediterranean started shifting, but was at first seen as of little consequence. Additionally, the failed coup attempt against President R. T. Erdogan decreased the level and quality of communication and cooperation between both militaries. In 2020, Turkish aggressiveness openly manifested itself in the Eastern Mediterranean, including directly against France with the Courbet incident. This attitude was criticized by the interviewees who specified that such behavior, along with unilateral actions and *faits accomplis*, would not be tolerated in the future. Yet, it also appears that the French military show respect for the Turkish armed forces. The latter are generally accredited with professionalism, reliability, efficiency and determination. The interviews revealed no sign of animosity by the French officers towards their Turkish counterparts: sometimes, even the opposite was detected.

# Résumé

Durant l'été 2020, la Méditerranée centrale et orientale a été le centre de nouvelles tensions entre la France et la Turquie. Celles-ci ayant été en partie militaire, ce qui est inhabituel pour les deux pays, il est particulièrement important d'étudier la perception de l'armée turque et de sa doctrine par l'armée française. Les entretiens conduits avec des officiers français font paraître que 2016 et 2020 ont été, pour l'armée française, deux étapes importantes dans l'évolution des attitudes politiques et militaires turques. Depuis 2016, les conflits syrien et libyen ont montré que la France et la Turquie avaient des intérêts divergents. Dans la même année, le comportement de l'armée turque en Méditerranée orientale a commencé à changer, sans encore être perçu comme une source d'inquiétude. De plus, la tentative de coup d'état contre le président Erdogan a porté un coup à la qualité de la communication entre les deux armées. En 2020, l'agressivité du côté turque s'est ouvertement manifestée en Méditerranée orientale, y compris face à la France lors de l'incident de la frégate Courbet. Ce comportement a été critiqué par les personnes interrogées qui précisaient que de telles actions unilatérales visant à imposer des faits accomplis ne seraient pas tolérées dans l'avenir. En même temps, l'armée française semble avoir un certain respect pour les Forces armées turques. Ces dernières sont généralement perçues comme professionnelles, fiables, déterminées et efficaces. Les entretiens n'ont révélé aucune animosité de la part des officiers français envers leurs homologues turcs. Dans certains cas, ils ont même montré le contraire.

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# Introduction<sup>1</sup>

In 2020, the Eastern and Central Mediterranean became the center of unusual tensions between two North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) members, Turkey and France, with other states of the region such as Greece, Cyprus and Egypt aligning with France on several issues. Indeed, Turkey's adventurism in the region, with actions perceived as a multifaceted effort to appropriate maritime zones unlawfully and defy international rules at sea at the expense of Greece and Cyprus, as well as the instrumentalization of migrants, have created serious concerns for the European Union (EU). The 2020 key-findings of the European Commission on Turkey,<sup>2</sup> the European Parliament's resolutions,<sup>3</sup> and consecutive declarations by the EU Council,<sup>4</sup> by the MED 7<sup>5</sup> and by the EUMED 9<sup>6</sup> show a European consensus on the perception of Turkey's attitude in the Eastern Mediterranean as problematic. In addition, Turkey's purchase of the Russian *S-400* anti-aircraft missile system, and its militarized regional policy in Syria, Libya and the Caucasus, including the use of Syrian mercenaries, have triggered criticisms also on the behalf of NATO and by the United States (US). Nevertheless, France's strong reaction to the Turkish expansionism was eventually perceived by some EU States as not balanced. In contrast with France's sensitivities, Germany has advocated a more conciliatory approach to Turkey, although, given Ankara's mindset and the nature of Turkish actions in the summer 2020, it may be asked how effective the

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

2. *Key Findings of the 2020 Report on Turkey*, European Commission, October 2020, available at: [ec.europa.eu](https://ec.europa.eu).

3. European Parliament resolution of September 17, 2020 on the preparation of the special European Council summit focusing on the dangerous escalation and the role of Turkey in the Eastern Mediterranean, available at: [www.europarl.europa.eu](https://www.europarl.europa.eu).

4. Special meeting of the European Council (October 1 and 2, 2020) – Conclusions, available at: [www.consilium.europa.eu](https://www.consilium.europa.eu); European Council meeting (December 10 and 11, 2020) – Conclusions, available at: [www.consilium.europa.eu](https://www.consilium.europa.eu); Statement of the Members of the European Council (March 25, 2021), available at: [www.consilium.europa.eu](https://www.consilium.europa.eu).

5. Ajaccio declaration after the 7<sup>th</sup> Summit of the Southern EU countries (MED7) (September 10, 2020, available at: [www.diplomatie.gouv.fr](https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr)).

6. Declaration of the 8<sup>th</sup> summit of the Southern European countries, Athens, September 17, 2021, available at: [www.pio.gov.cy](https://www.pio.gov.cy).



German approach would have been in stopping Turkey's strategy of operational *faits accomplis* if not combined with France's tough approach. Other Mediterranean States such as Spain, Italy and Malta have adhered to the declarations of the EU Council, MED 7 and EUMED 9 that denounced unequivocally the Turkish attitude and actions but, in parallel, they have adopted behavior denoting a desire not to escalate tensions with Ankara,<sup>7</sup> while they are also known to have blocked further sanctions against Turkey at the December 2020 European summit. Yet, France's sensitiveness regarding the Eastern Mediterranean is logically and legitimately higher than that of any other influential EU member. France has been operating in the region for decades, particularly in Lebanon and off Syria, while it has important partners in the region, such as Egypt and Cyprus, which are also highly concerned by Turkey's regional designs. France is also militarily involved in the Sahel; events in Libya and, by extension, in the Eastern Mediterranean, have also their importance with regard to this strategic theater. Moreover, the Eastern Mediterranean is on the way to the Indo-Pacific, where France has land and maritime territories, hundreds of thousands of nationals, and thousands of deployed forces. In sum, the French have a unique position among EU members and it is to be expected that actions perceived as aiming to upset international rules in a way that may affect France's long-term ability to navigate and operate in the region, will meet resistance.

## Methodology

This paper's objective is to try to map, as best possible, the French military's state of mind on Turkey and its armed forces, and particularly on their doctrine and attitude in the Mediterranean, to help explain France's reaction in the summer of 2020. To this end, the author conducted several interviews, between March and September 2021, with French officers and a civil servant from the Ministry of Armed Forces (MINARM). The officers are serving or recently retired and are all high-ranking. Although all the armed forces are represented among the persons interviewed (Navy, Army and Air Force officers), most of them belong to the Navy, as they interact more with their Turkish counterparts, while the French-Turkish row crystallized at sea. All but one spoke on the condition of anonymity.

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7. For instance: M. Ozturk and B. N. B. Cakmak "Turkey Not Only Partner, an Ally: Top Spanish Diplomat", *Anadolu agency*, July 27, 2020, available at: [www.aa.com.tr](http://www.aa.com.tr); E. Villarejo, "España no participará por ahora en la misión naval de la UE en Libia", *ABC Blogs*, July 13, 2020, available at: [abcblogs.abc.es](http://abcblogs.abc.es); Joint Statement by the Foreign Ministers of Libya, Malta, and Turkey (August 6, 2020), available at: [foreignandeu.gov.mt](http://foreignandeu.gov.mt); "Turkey, Italy Conduct Joint Submarine Drill in the Mediterranean", *Al Monitor*, June 16, 2020, available at: [www.al-monitor.com](http://www.al-monitor.com).

It shall be noted that, as military officers, the interviewees do not necessarily respond to the same analytical and communication “codes” like policy-makers, diplomats or scholars. They bring a different type of expertise and, consequently, a novel analytical perspective to the French-Turkish issue, based on their unique experience and position in the decision-making process, which this paper seeks to set out. For this reason, the content of the interviews constitutes the very substance of this paper and has been prioritized over external sources and analysis, which are used complementarily. Accordingly, unless otherwise stated or suggested, analysis and assertions belong to the interviewees. Lastly, some persons or countries to which the interviewees refer are not always designed by their names, as this may be sensitive.

All Internet sources were accessed on November 15, 2021.

***The views and opinions expressed by the interviewees do not necessarily express the official position of, are not necessarily endorsed by, and cannot be attributed to the MINARM. Also, the author of this paper acknowledges it may not be exhaustive.***

## Summary and Key Findings

It appears that for the French military, 2016 and 2020 are two milestones in the evolution of the Turkish attitudes, both political and military. From 2016 onwards, the Syrian and Libyan conflicts uncovered diverging interests between France and Turkey, *with military implications for France*. In the same year, Turkish military behavior in the Eastern Mediterranean started shifting, but it was at first seen as of little consequence. In addition, the failed coup against President Erdogan decreased the level and quality of communication and cooperation between both militaries. In 2020, Turkish aggressivity openly manifested itself in the Eastern Mediterranean, including *directly* against France with the *Courbet* incident (see p. 20 and following), an attitude that is assessed severely by the interviewees, who are clear that such behavior, along with unilateral actions and *faits accomplis*, will not be tolerated in the future. Yet, it also appears that the French military show respect for the Turkish armed forces. The latter are generally accredited with professionalism, reliability, efficiency and determination. The interviews revealed no sign of animosity by the French officers towards their Turkish counterparts: sometimes, even the opposite was detected.

# The French Military's Perception and Experience of the Turkish Military

## How French Navy Officers See Their Turkish Colleagues

All the navy officers interviewed showed respect for the operational capabilities of the Turkish navy, both in terms of material and skills. All of them agree that what characterizes the Turkish navy is good organization, highly skilled staff, professionalism, experience, respect of procedures, determination and reliability. In that sense, the Turkish navy resembles the French. When French and Turkish officers interact in normal conditions, they understand each other very well; *“they are like us; they are our brothers in arms”*, said a recently-retired high ranking navy officer (Officer 1), while he reported that Turkish admirals have expressed respect and interest for France’s independence in its defense industry, which has been among Turkey’s top strategic priorities in the past few years. Another retired navy officer, who has occupied high positions in the military and civil structure of the MINARM (Officer 2), depicted the Turkish admirals as secularists, Jacobins and self-confident, pretty much like their French counterparts. He highlighted that the Turkish admirals are picked among the elite of the elite of their country, through meritocracy and that they are ultra-nationalists and ultra-elitists, with a very high intellectual level. By contrast, both officers do not seem to accredit navies of other influential EU partners with the same attributes. As officer 2 put it, *“If we [the French navy] were to go to war alongside the Turks, we wouldn’t think twice. To be totally frank, I’m not sure I can say the same if this were to happen with some of our influential European partners”*, while Officer 1 deplored the unconvincing behavior of another powerful European navy in 2018 in an incident off Cyprus involving the Turkish navy.

However, the French officers also pointed out clear differences with the Turks. For instance, in their eyes, it seems that the distinction between determination and roughness is not always very clear for their Turkish counterparts. The latter also have an uncommon degree of nationalism and a different view of the limits

between military affairs and politics, which obviously stems from the particular role of the military in Turkey, that is atypical in NATO. Regularly collaborating with Turks in NATO *before* the failed coup of 2016, Officer 2 described how a Turkish ambassador ostentatiously behaved as a subordinate to an army general while, according to NATO protocols, the military officer was supposed to be his subordinate. In the opinion of Officer 2, this was to make clear to everyone who “the boss” really was. This was very characteristic of the Turkish uniqueness, as it simply could not happen with any other NATO member, and showed that the military were at the top of Turkey’s power hierarchy. Moreover, Officer 2 depicted the Turkish navy officers as Atlanticists and admirative of the US, much like their German – but not French – counterparts. He specified, however, that this fascination has gradually decreased under R. T. Erdogan’s rule, but that respect and a certain fear of American military power is still evident in the Turkish army.

Officer 1, who attended the Gallipoli battle commemoration a few years ago, also pointed out important differences in attitudes. He was particularly surprised by the frequent use of militaristic rhetoric, with inflamed declarations that are totally uncommon for European “standards”, such as “*they shall know that, if needed, we’ll do that again*”. This would never happen in the context of a commemoration in Europe, where precisely an opposite discourse would prevail: this is seen by Officer 1 as the sign of a growing divergence in values between Turkey and Europe.

Overall, despite such differences, perceptions of the Turkish officers cannot be characterized as negative, particularly in the Navy. French officers respect their Turkish counterparts and feel close to them in some respects. But, at the same time, they seem to be absolutely aware of differences in mindsets and attitudes, and know that they are not dealing with the same domestic dynamics, particularly in their relationship to the political power in their respective countries. This seems to be a central issue and it is especially visible in the context of NATO cooperation.

## **French Officers’ Experience of the Turkish Military in the Context of NATO**

In their performance as partners within NATO, the Turkish military are generally depicted as professional and reliable, but also rough and often ambiguous regarding their real intentions. In general, they are

perceived as different from other allies in that the limits between their national agenda and their behavior in NATO are not always very clear, and there were also situations in which the French appear to be the specific target of some Turkish attitudes.

As an army officer (Officer 3) reported: in 2002, France and Turkey were jointly guarding the Kabul airport, during the Turkish command of the ISAF.<sup>8</sup> While, on the ground, the cooperation was efficient, authorities in Ankara systematically created problems. They delivered diplomatic clearance for supply flights coming from France that needed to cross the Turkish airspace only after negotiations that were normally not needed, while no other Ally faced such an attitude. By contrast, the Russians would play fair and let the French use their airspace without problems. *“In other words, it was easier to work with the Russians than with a NATO ally in a NATO operation...”* Officer 3 deplored, while he saw the Bill recognizing the Armenian Genocide passed by the French National Assembly a year earlier as the most likely explanation for this behavior.<sup>9</sup> If that was indeed the case, it would also mean that Turkey does not compartmentalize bilateral *political* issues and ongoing NATO *operational* cooperation.

However, most of incidents appear not to be related to bilateral issues.

Officer 3 related that in 1997 in Sarajevo, a Turkish officer who, by virtue of his very position – and in a highly explosive context of inter-ethnic violence – was supposed to observe strict impartiality between the communities (Serbs, Croats, Bosniaks), actually favored blatantly the Bosniaks.<sup>10</sup> Indeed, this officer originated from the Muslim population of the Sanjak and was fluent in Serbo-Croat, that is why he had been chosen as liaison officer of the SFOR<sup>11</sup> at the headquarters of the Bosnian army in Kakanj. However, he was communicating to the Bosniaks either confidential or absolutely fake information, resulting in sowing discord among the three

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8. The International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) was the NATO-led operation deployed in Afghanistan from 2001 to 2014, following a UN mandate: available at [www.nato.int](http://www.nato.int). For an overview of the Turkish military presence in Afghanistan from 2001 to 2021, see, for instance: M. Aydogan, “Turkey’s Long Involvement in NATO Mission in Afghanistan”, *Anadolu Agency*, June 19, 2021, available at: [www.aa.com.tr](http://www.aa.com.tr).

9. Loi n° 2001-70 du 29 janvier 2001 relative à la reconnaissance du génocide arménien de 1915, available at: [www.legifrance.gouv.fr](http://www.legifrance.gouv.fr).

10. Until today, Turkey has deep links with the Bosniaks. See, for instance: H. F. Buyuk, “Turkish Govt Urged to Speak Out about Bosnia’s Political Crisis”, *Balkan Insight*, November 4, 2021, available at: <https://balkaninsight.com>.

11. The SFOR (Stabilization Force in Bosnia and Herzegovina) was a NATO-led peacekeeping operation deployed in Bosnia following the Bosnian war in 1997: available at [www.nato.int](http://www.nato.int). At that time, the commander of the Turkish Task Force in Bosnia was Hulusi Akar, Turkey’s current minister of defense, available at: [www.msb.gov.tr](http://www.msb.gov.tr).

communities, in contradiction with the objectives of the international coalition and the spirit of the Dayton agreement.<sup>12</sup> Officer 3 was unable to say if this Turkish officer was acting following orders from Ankara, on personal initiative or by clumsiness. Yet, similar disturbing behavior during the NATO operation in Bosnia was also experienced by an Air Force officer (Officer 4). He witnessed a striking incident in 1993-1994, when the Turks took up a zone for air patrolling and aggressively asked that no other airplane would overfly their zone, including NATO ones – which happened to be French. *“This was totally irrelevant and non-sense as a claim. In any case, there are procedures (rules of engagement, identification), which had not been followed. It was a weird and very dangerous attitude in operational terms”*, he explained. Given the deep relations between Turkey and the Muslim Bosniaks, the operation in Bosnia appears as a typical example in which the Turks boosted a nationalist agenda in the framework of a NATO mission sometimes at the expense of the common objectives.

For his part, Officer 2 emphasized the general attitude of compromise the Turks had adopted with the Taliban, because they did not want to be actively associated with the NATO *combat operations* in Afghanistan. According to him, Turkey played the card of religious and cultural proximity to avoid the image of foreign invaders, and was conveying the message that “if there are friends of yours in NATO, it is us.” It was a unique posture among allies, as Turkey is also the only Muslim member of NATO. *“Discussions held in summer 2021 on the possibility that Turkey maintains a contingent in Afghanistan after NATO has left, are not coincidental”*, he stressed.

Later in the 2010s, Officer 4 was serving at SHAPE<sup>13</sup> when the NATO reorganization process took place, with positions being redistributed between members of the Alliance. He then witnessed again some attitudes from the Turks seen as irrelevant, as they demanded many more positions than could be justified. While the negotiations seemed to reach a deadlock, the Turkish representative went to take instructions from Ankara, after which he started asking even more than what had been refused to him previously. *“Everyone started laughing. So yes, in normal circumstances the Turks are reliable, interoperable and respect the procedures. And when our*

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12. The General Framework Agreement for Peace in Bosnia and Herzegovina, known as the Dayton agreement, was signed in late 1995 and put an end to the 3,5-years Bosnian war, available at: [www.osce.org](http://www.osce.org).

13. Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe (SHAPE) is the NATO Headquarters located in Mons, Belgium.

*interests converge, they play fair and are efficient. But only then. Otherwise, they are very rude, they don't have a culture of collective interest, not to speak about solidarity. When they stray off course, there is no safeguard and no room for compromise", he claims.*

Such behavior, seen as quirky, unexpected or ambiguous, was not always easy to decipher at the time, although it seems not unrelated to the wider post-Cold War strategic reshuffle in which Turkey has started to push a bolder, nationalist agenda, somewhat distancing itself from NATO's common objectives. However, this was not enough to jeopardize French-Turkish military relations within NATO, which continued to be cordial and effective.



# When Turkey Started to Be Perceived as a Potential Military Issue for France

## The Syrian Conflict until 2016

According to Brigadier General Bertrand Toujouse from the General Staff, it was the Syrian conflict that caused the first serious doubts as to Turkey's intentions. The first issue that made France doubt the convergence of Turkish, French and NATO interests was the battle of Kobane, when Ankara showed reluctance to assist the Syrian Kurds in their struggle against ISIS, before finally accepting to do so, following American pressure.<sup>14</sup> However, this never evolved into an *operational* issue for France, as it had no troops in the area. The second hitch came after the fall of Mosul, in June 2014, when, instead of the removal of the al-Assad regime, it was the Islamic State and the potential fall of Baghdad into the hands of the Caliphate that became the priority of the US and France. At this stage, the Turks were still cooperating despite expressing some doubts. Moreover, their military deployment was not substantial yet and, accordingly, the risk of a military row with French and NATO forces was low. *“However, when the Coalition started to engage in Syria, in the aftermath of the 2015 Bataclan terror attacks, we clearly saw that, for the Turks, the problem No1 were the Kurds and not ISIS. It was our first real divergence”*, General Toujouse explained. But again, this divergence of views between France and Turkey had no operational consequences at the time. In September 2015, the Russians engaged in Syria, altering the whole rationale of the war: the situation moved from an “ISIS against everyone” to “the Russians are supporting al-Assad” one. This was against Turkish interests, as Ankara still saw the fall of al-Assad as a top objective.<sup>15</sup> Then in November 2015, a Russian jet

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14. It should be recalled that Turkey considers the Syrian-Kurd People's Protection Unit (YPG), which operates along the border between Turkey and Syrian Kurdistan as a terrorist organization, along with the Kurdistan Worker's Party (PKK) that has been engaged in decades-long deadly guerilla activities in Southeast Turkey.

15. The removal of al-Assad has long been a top objective for Turkey, since Ankara supported the Arab uprisings as a way to extend its influence over the Sunni Muslim world. Elections in Syria, after the backbone of the al-Assad regime and its political alliances had been broken, would have likely brought to power the Sunni Muslim majority. The latter could have evolved into a major potential ally for Turkey, particularly in its struggle against Kurdish irredentism. However, as



allegedly violated the Turkish airspace close to the Syrian border and was shot down by the Turks.<sup>16</sup>

## The Syrian and the Libyan Conflicts after 2016

The 2016 coup attempt in Turkey and Donald Trump's election in the US radically changed the situation, fostering Turkish-Russian rapprochement, as Turkey sought to evict the West from the Syria and Libya. In particular, the use of Syrian fighters in Libya sent by the Turks started to be perceived as a real military threat for France. As General Toujouse specified: "*France was worried that Libya would turn into a fertile ground for Islamic radicalization, which, after the Bataclan terror attacks, became a core security issue for us. There were also legitimate concerns that military equipment sent to Libya could make its way to the Sahel, a scenario that would have real, concrete security and operational consequences for us, as we operate there. If you add the fact that very sensitive information concerning the position of NATO forces in Syria leaked on non-governmental Turkish Internet sites, we definitely felt that the situation was becoming very unhealthy.*" This was precisely the moment Turkey started to be seen as a potential military issue for France, since core French security and military interests were involved, while the overall military intensity of the conflict increased, with all dangers that such developments entail.

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Russia's military intervention in Syria rendered the fall of al-Assad unlikely, Turkey has shifted towards an acceptance of the regime, as the latter is now seen as necessary to contain the Syrian Kurds. For more, see: A. Sever, "Regional Power Role and Intervention: The Turkish Case over Syria in the 2000s", *Contemporary Review of the Middle East*, Vol. 7, No. 2, 2020, pp. 143-64. DOI: 10.1177/2347798920901870.

16. M. Chance and M. Martinez, "5 Things You Need to Know about Russian Jet Shot Down by Turkey", *BBC*, November 25, 2015, available at: [edition.cnn.com](https://www.bbc.com/news/defense-2015-11-25).

# The 2016 Coup: A Milestone

In general, all the interviewees agree that the 2016 failed coup was a milestone regarding the dynamics of Turkey's behavior, including for its military.

## The Failed Coup's Impact on Regular Communication and Cooperation between French and Turkish Militaries

Some anecdotes reported by the interviewees illustrate the violent effects of the failed coup on the army and the attitudes of Turkish officers. Officer 3 – who happened to serve as military *attaché* in an Asian country – relates that his Turkish counterpart, who belonged to the Air Force, simply vanished after the coup.<sup>17</sup> He interpreted this as a blatant sign that something very serious was going on within the Turkish armed forces. The Turkish military *attaché* was eventually replaced by a colonel from the Air Force, who proved very keen in arguing – seemingly politely – about issues related to France and Syrian migration. During their regular informal meetings, the *attachés* of NATO states present in that country often asked their new Turkish colleague about Syria and the Astana process, but he would not say a word; “*then, he simply ceased to come to our meetings*”, Officer 3 recalls. These signs were received as evidence that Turkey was moving away from NATO and the West.

Officer 4 confirms that the coup altered the Turkish military's attitude and that the army experienced serious difficulties. Serving in Paris at the time, he recalls a period of hesitant relations, with difficulties in obtaining clear answers and positions from the Turks on ongoing cooperation, while there were strong signs of disorganization, particularly in the Air Force. He quotes a very characteristic episode: “*At one moment, they asked us to make them a presentation of our air defense system, the SAMP/T, as they were apparently interested in purchasing it. But they were unaware that we had already presented it to a Turkish delegation six months earlier! Such things*

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17. Similar incidents have been reported for Turkish officers serving at NATO: N. Gros-Verheyde, “La question des officiers turcs mine l'OTAN”, *Bruxelles2*, November 22, 2016, available at: [www.bruxelles2.eu](http://www.bruxelles2.eu).

*never happen in normal conditions.*” France eventually started to be cautious in engaging in cooperation with the Turks, as the political situation in their country was not the best possible. *“It could easily turn into a hornet’s nest for us”*, Officer 3 added.

For his part, Officer 2 sees the loss of power of the armed forces in Turkey after the failed coup of 2016 as potentially detrimental to their ability to attract recruits from the most competent members of Turkish society in the long run, particularly in the light of the conditions in which this happened: including purges and imprisonment.

## Repercussions in the Eastern Mediterranean

In the Eastern Mediterranean, the real turning point the French-Turkish military relations is commonly accepted by the interviewees as being the June 2020 incident, when the French frigate *Le Courbet* was targeted three times by a Turkish warship’s fire control radars (so-called “target illumination”), off Libya. Target illumination is the last step in naval engagement before firing, and is therefore considered as an unequivocally hostile posture. However, it seems that the *Courbet* incident was only the last – albeit the most serious – of a series of incidents between the French and Turkish navies in the Eastern Mediterranean since 2016. As a recently retired navy officer who occupied top positions (Officer 5) reported, in 2016 a Turkish military vessel fired a distress rocket towards a French warship off Lebanon. *“It was the first time we faced such an attitude”*, he remembers. When the French asked what happened, the Turks replied that they took them for terrorists. Interestingly enough, they did not assert they had made a mistake, nor did they apologize. *“It was very strange, and a signal that was difficult to decipher for us. We initially interpreted it as a sign of nervousness and/or the result of a loss of skills due to the purges. In retrospect, following the Courbet incident, I can’t rule out that it might well have been the first forewarning sign of the aggressive Turkish posture we observed in the Eastern Mediterranean later in 2020”*, he stressed. A second incident took place in 2018, when a Turkish warship carried out target illumination of a French frigate at night, south of Cyprus. The Turks claimed that they did not know it was a French vessel, although Officer 1 has his doubts, as no contact for identification had preceded. According to him, it is highly probable that the Turks wanted to show that the area is theirs, and a French ship could easily have been the target of such a message. Whatever

the case, the French frigate went back in the same area the next day and the Turks refrained from any action.

Thus, it appears that the *Courbet* incident was not the first case of the Turkish navy targeting a French warship. However, the previous incidents did not make waves, as the Turks did not opt for escalation. As Officer 1 explained, in principle there is no reflex of being on guard with the Turks, because they are a member of NATO. Both navies know each other, procedures are integrated, there is a very high degree of predictability and this is actually what made the Turks' behavior in 2020 bewildering. *“With the Russians, we have denser rules and procedures when we meet each other at sea, because we are rivals and an incident is more likely to have uncontrolled consequences. This is logical. What is not normal is to need to be equally careful with the Turks, who are allies. Clearly, there is something wrong here”*, he remarked.

# How the Situation in the Eastern Mediterranean Changed for France in 2020

For France, 2020 appears to be a notable year in the Mediterranean. First, because of the *Courbet* incident and, second, because of Turkey's overall challenging attitude.

## The *Courbet* Incident

The *Courbet* incident was definitely a milestone in the French officers' perception of Turkey's posture. According to General Toujouse, it was the open manifestation of Turkish duplicity. It equates to crossing an "orange" line, after a series of developments that had already provoked concerns in Paris as to the real intentions and orientations of Turkey, but that had, nevertheless, not led to direct friction between both countries' forces until then. It is, however, important to note that the real reasons which led to the *Courbet* incident are not fully clear to the French officers. None of them could say with certitude if it was orchestrated by Ankara, or due to the over-zealousness of one commander, who could have been either applauded for his initiative, or covered by his superiors for reasons of national pride, or because it was too late to react. In any case, Ankara decided to fully endorse this action.

The incident happened in the context of Turkey smuggling weapons to Libya in violation of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) resolution 2292 (2016),<sup>18</sup> prompting the control of cargo ships suspected to be involved in such dealings, within the framework of the NATO operation *Sea Guardian*.<sup>19</sup> According to Officer 5,

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18. This UNSC resolution 2292 (2016) calls for the strict implementation of the arms embargo on the high seas off the coasts of Libya in the context of the Libyan civil war, available at: <https://undocs.org>.

19. Operation *Sea Guardian* (available at: [www.nato.int](http://www.nato.int)) is a NATO operation launched in November 2016. It succeeded to the counter-terrorism NATO operation *Active Endeavour* (available at: [www.nato.int](http://www.nato.int)) launched in 2001, and extended the scope of its action to maritime security capacity building, and support for maritime security awareness. In this context, it also provided support to the EU operation *SOPHIA* (available at: [www.operationsophia.eu](http://www.operationsophia.eu)) on the basis of the UNSC resolution 2292 (2016). Operation *IRINI* ("Peace" in Greek; available at: [www.operationirini.eu](http://www.operationirini.eu)) succeeded operation *SOPHIA* in March 2020, and is mandated to proceed with inspections of vessels on high seas suspected of arms smuggling to and from Libya,

the target illumination was not an *operational act*, as you simply do not fire at a ship from such short distance; therefore, the real risk of military escalation was actually low. Instead, it was a *posture* – the last in a series of messages. Following the intensification of controls by warships operating as part of operations *Sea Guardian* and *IRINI*, the cargo ships suspected of involvement in arms smuggling to Libya started to be escorted by the Turkish navy. However, controls continued to be carried on; it was in this context that the *Courbet* tried to control the cargo ship *Çirkin*, under Tanzanian flag but operated by the Turkish shipping company Avrasya<sup>20</sup> and escorted by Turkish military vessels. This was precisely when the target illumination of the French frigate took place, in order for the Turks to show that they were determined to keep with the mission they are performing in Libya. As Officer 5 explained, the control of the cargo ships is particularly problematic for Turkey, as it allows irrefutable evidence to be established of what is actually going on, and these elements are made available to decision-makers, and may potentially be exposed publicly. Officer 5 believes that the Turks could have claimed that the target illumination was done “by error”; nobody would have really believed them, but escalation would have been avoided. However, the fact that not only did Turkey choose not to avoid escalation but also presented itself as a victim (according to Turkey’s ambassador in France when he was auditioned by the French Senate),<sup>21</sup> shows that Ankara fully endorsed the action. “Following this, France also assumed having a strong reaction towards Turkey, and bilateral relations quickly deteriorated thereafter”, he explained. One immediate consequences of this incident was France’s withdrawal from the NATO operation *Sea Guardian*; it currently participates only in the EU operation *IRINI*.

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in application of the UNSC resolution 2292 (2016). Its mandate has been extended up to March 2023.

20. This shipping company was, later, targeted by EU sanctions: R. Emmott, “EU Sanctions Turkish Company Accused of breaking Libya Embargo”, *Reuters*, September 21, 2020, available at: [www.reuters.com](http://www.reuters.com).

21. Audition of H. E. M. İsmail Hakkı Musa, ambassador of Turkey in France before the Commission of Foreign Affairs, Defense and Armed Forces of the Senate (in French), available at: [www.senat.fr](http://www.senat.fr).

## The French Position on the Turkish Behavior and Claims in the Eastern Mediterranean

### ***Elements of the Context of the Legal Issues in the Eastern Mediterranean<sup>22</sup>***

In the Eastern Mediterranean, the application of the international law of the Sea runs into two separate but intertwined issues: on the one hand, delimitation issues and on the other, the activities undertaken in undelimited areas (scientific research, seismic surveys for natural resources and drilling).

Regarding the delimitation issues, international law provides two ways to proceed: negotiations and, in case of failure, resort to international adjudication. Greece advocates the resort to international adjudication, as it is confident that its claims are consistent with the principles and methods of maritime delimitation law.<sup>23</sup> By contrast, Turkey calls for a political management of the issue, based on interests and geopolitics,<sup>24</sup> as most of its claims are hardly compatible with the fundamental principles of the Law of the Sea.<sup>25</sup> This is why Turkey has yet to adhere to the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). Considering that the EU is primarily a normative power and that all the EU members (and the EU as an organization) are party to UNCLOS,<sup>26</sup> it is logical that it fosters a legal approach on the issue. This automatically “favors” the Greek position but not the Turkish unlawful claims and unilateral coercive actions. This is seen in Ankara as a “biased approach” stemming from “blind solidarity” of EU members with Greece and Cyprus.<sup>27</sup> Conversely, keeping equal distance between Greek and

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22. This sub-section is based exclusively on information by the author and is not attributable to the interviewees. As the 2020 crisis was related to maritime delimitation issues and activities undertaken in undelimited areas, law governing these fields determine the States' behavior. Therefore, it is necessary in order to introduce the topic.

23. For the Greek positions on Greek-Turkish bilateral issues in a nutshell, see: Issues of Greek - Turkish Relations, *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Hellenic Republic*, available at: [www.mfa.gr](http://www.mfa.gr).

24. For the Turkish positions on delimitation issues in the Eastern Mediterranean in a nutshell, see: G. Erciyez, “Eastern Mediterranean: Turkey's Legal and Political Views”, available at: [www.mfa.gov.tr](http://www.mfa.gov.tr).

25. Notably the unilateral right for any coastal State to extend its territorial waters up to 12 nautical miles, the right of the islands to generate all legal maritime zones, and the general customary principle according to which the land dominates the sea.

26. UNCLOS is part of the *acquis communautaire*. Accordingly, any state wishing to adhere to the EU adheres to UNCLOS.

27. See, for instance: O. Ant, “Turkey Urges EU States to End ‘Blind’ Support for Greece in Spat”, Bloomberg, September 11, 2020, available at: [www.bloomberg.com](http://www.bloomberg.com).



Turkish claims is perceived in Athens as unfair, as those claims are not equally legitimate under international law.

The legality of activities taking place in undelimited areas is determined by their nature, the context in which they take place and the motivations of the actors involved. In general, it can be said that:<sup>28</sup>

- Scientific research (for instance, seabed mapping) is fully allowed in undelimited areas, as it is not related to the natural resources on which the coastal States claim *exclusive* rights.
- Seismic surveying – which does not directly harm the seafloor – is not necessarily unlawful, unless it jeopardizes the efforts to reach an agreement, as it is related to natural resources.
- Drilling activities can be considered as unlawful, especially when conducted close to – and of course beyond – the provisional equidistance line, that is considered by international courts as the starting point of the delimitation process by default.

In any case, any activity should be conducted in good faith and not take place with the purpose of gaining advantage in a delimitation process by leading to *faits accomplis*. Accordingly, the disputed zone should also be the result of claims that have been expressed in good faith, within the purview of international law.

As Turkey's seismic survey and drilling ships have been escorted by warships, it may be asked if Turkey itself was unaware that its actions would trigger other countries' reaction and, therefore, that they were hampering the reaching of a final agreement. Besides, Turkey considers the area in which its ships operated as having been *already delimited* (not simply claimed), which is also in contravention of international law as, by definition, delimitation does not take place unilaterally, but only through an agreement, or by resorting to international adjudication.

### ***The Three Pillars Guiding France's Action in the Eastern Mediterranean***

According to the interviewees, France's political and diplomatic position – and so its military posture – on Eastern Mediterranean issues is based on three interconnected pillars, which, in 2020, were

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28. For more, see: N. A. Ioannides, "The Legal Framework Governing Hydrocarbon Activities in Undelimited Maritime Areas", *International and Comparative Law Quarterly*, Vol. 68, No. 2, pp. 345-368, 2019. DOI:10.1017/S0020589319000010. The recent decision of the International Court of Justice (ICJ) on the maritime delimitation between Kenya and Somalia corroborates that seismic surveys and drilling activities that are conducted in bad faith or hamper the reaching of an agreement can be considered as unlawful. I.C.J., Maritime delimitation in the Indian ocean (Somalia v. Kenya), par. 198-213, available at: [www.icj-cij.org](http://www.icj-cij.org).



to be put at test by Turkey:

- Respect of international law and treaties;
- Respect of freedom of navigation;
- Solidarity with EU members states.

### **The Respect of International Law, Treaties and Freedom of Navigation**

In 2020, the difficulties arising with Turkey's behavior in the Eastern Mediterranean had two dimensions. On the one hand, Turkey proceeded with unlawful activities, while on the other hand performing unfriendly actions aimed at undermining the largely agreed legal order of the sea. Some unfriendly actions that are not necessarily illegal *per se* seem to be used to pursue objectives that are illegal, such as the unilateral appropriation of maritime zones. As mentioned above, international law is unambiguous as to how the process of delimitation (and, therefore, of appropriation) takes place: through interstate agreements or international adjudication.<sup>29</sup> As the Chief of Staff of the French Navy, Admiral Vandier, summarized in a debate at Ifri on 17 June 2021,<sup>30</sup> at sea it is easier to challenge the rules and a certain order without clearly crossing a red line by using non-conventional means, as the process is subtler and can easily be hybrid. This can be done in multiple ways, like drilling activities, overflights, or restraining *de facto* the freedom of navigation. In 2020, the Eastern Mediterranean was effectively the theater of all such incidents.

#### **• *Violations of International Law and Treaties***

Among violations of international law, unilateral actions and *faits accomplis* in non-delimited areas, as well as the threat to use force can be mentioned. Indeed, as long as maritime zones have not been delimited between Greece and Turkey according to international law, France considers that the high seas regime applies beyond territorial waters: that is full freedom. Besides, according to the interviewees, France has a long-established consistent position on such matters, and attempts to upset the order founded on international law and hinder freedom of navigation cannot but face a response. As General

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29. So far, no agreement has been concluded or resort to international adjudication agreed between Turkey and its neighbors in the Eastern Mediterranean, except with the breakaway "Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus" in 2011, and the Tripoli-based al-Sarraj government. The first has no international recognition and the second was a political entity with weak legitimacy in Libya, something that is likely to compromise this agreement in the future.

30. "Amiral Pierre Vandier – La Marine française au défi de l'Indo-Pacifique", Ifri, June 17, 2021, available at: [www.ifri.org](http://www.ifri.org). Debate not available online.

Toujouse states, *“France defends international law, while there is a global tendency of erosion of the order founded on international rules. This is not acceptable and particularly intolerable when it is initiated by a NATO ally and directed against EU members.”*

- ***Efforts to Subvert the Legal Regime in the Eastern Mediterranean***

From the interviews, it appears that Turkey is seen as having deployed a multidimensional strategy embracing indirect and hybrid ways to subvert the legal regime in the Eastern Mediterranean. As a high-ranking navy officer (Officer 6) explained, Turkey more than once behaved ambiguously without many scruples to serve its national agenda. *“For instance, the Turks regularly use the ‘NATO’ status for their ships depending on their needs. We don’t do that. If a French warship is on mission as a French and not a NATO ship, it will not suddenly declare herself to be a NATO ship in order to justify an action that has nothing to do with NATO or, worst, that is directed against another ally. The Turks don’t play fair on that”,* he deplored. He also reported that, in 2020: *“Turkey reserved undersea zones without any limit.<sup>31</sup> It was an abuse and a de facto denial of access, while most of the time we believe they didn’t even use the area they had reserved. This is against the spirit of the relevant NATO gentlemen’s agreement; it is a diversion of that agreement which is equivalent to rejecting it. It is dishonest and unacceptable behavior”,* he stressed. General Toujouse also explained that this indirect (“soft”) denial of access is a novelty in the Eastern Mediterranean, as more and more Turkish ships operate in the region, reserving more and more zones for military drills or declaring security zones. *“It’s pretty like what China does in the South China Sea”,* he concluded. And, indeed, the French discourse on the Turkish attitude the Eastern Mediterranean resembles in many aspects the American discourse on the Chinese posture in the South China Sea.<sup>32</sup>

According to Officer 6, the French position is crystal clear: it is non-escalatory, but France maintains its naval presence in the area and the respect of UNCLOS. He explained that, in 2020, France dispatched ships close to the areas where the Turks operated for two main reasons: first, to show the flag in order to lift any ambiguity as to

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31. NATO’s gentlemen’s agreement consists in reserving undersea areas for operational purposes, in order to avoid accidents between submarines.

32. “Secretary Antony J. Blinken at the United Nations Security Council Meeting on Maintenance of International Peace and Security: Maritime Security”, US Department of State, August 9, 2021, available at: [www.state.gov](https://www.state.gov). It is interesting though that A. Blinken mentioned numerous maritime areas in which he claims the rule of law to be endangered, but he has made no reference to the Eastern Mediterranean.

the fact that Turkey's intimidation efforts are wrong and useless; second, to make it clear that any attempt of illegal and unilateral appropriation of the sea would meet resistance. However, he also insists that this was done in a non-aggressive way and without provocative postures. *"We strictly respected required distances between ships according to NATO procedures. We did not proceed to fire exercises, nor did we approach the Turkish territorial waters too close, although we could have done both in full accordance with international law. But we are not warmongers. We know that, at sea, provocative behavior is not necessarily illegal strictly speaking. But we don't play this game. We objectively kept a non-escalatory attitude and did not use the opportunities offered by the legal grey zones to act in bad faith"*, he asserted.

Yet, what are qualified as attempts to appropriate the Eastern Mediterranean are unacceptable to France also for operational reasons, as it has traditionally been operating in the area for decades. *"If we disappear from the area for 2-3 years, we will not enjoy the same rights and they will be very difficult to recover when we go back. The rules will have changed de facto. At sea, nothing is guaranteed like onshore. You have to be present in order to defend your lawful interests and international rules"*, Officer 6 explained.

### **Solidarity with EU Member States**

- ***The Case of Greece***

Most of the interviewees clarified that France supported Greece against Turkish unilateral acts, *faits accomplis* and threats because they bring instability and are directed against an EU Member State. However, according to the interviewees, this should not be understood as openly and actively taking sides in the Greek-Turkish delimitation dispute or endorsing the entirety of Greece's claims. As Officer 6 says, *"We acted carefully. We were firm about Turkish behavior but we never expressed any opinion on the Greek-Turkish delimitation dispute. There is a subtle but clear difference between showing solidarity among EU members against an aggressive violation of international law, and intervening actively in a delimitation issue. Actually, you simply don't resolve such an issue militarily, this is nonsense. But you do prevent illegal appropriation. What we want – and are determined to safeguard – is that international rules are respected, should they be in the field of freedom of navigation or in any delimitation process."* This whole French posture should be understood as an effort by France to deter Turkey from applying new rules in the region. This necessarily implies

supporting Greece, which is the first target of the Turkish pressure, but is not equivalent to endorsing the *entirety* of Greek claims. The author recalls that Egypt holds a similar view: Cairo avoids taking openly sides in the delimitation issues East of the 28<sup>th</sup> meridian and does not wish to become a captive of the complicated Greek-Turkish delimitation dispute. This has not prevented Greece and Egypt from greatly developing their relations – including in the military field.

In this respect, it is interesting to remark that some interviewees expressed an understanding for certain Turkish positions on delimitation issues and hoped for a resolution through international adjudication, although they repeated that the military have nothing to do with this process. Officer 5 elaborated further, expressing the personal opinion that there might be legal grounds for Turkey to defend some of its views, but the very fact that it opted for intransigence and military escalation instead of negotiation actually harms its interests: Turkish claims that might deserve a hearing hardly remain so when coupled with such an attitude.

Yet, several interviewees admitted that the subtle position between countering Turkey's unlawful behavior as a matter of principle and solidarity while, at the same time not taking sides actively in the Greek-Turkish delimitation dispute, has not been explained satisfactorily enough to other EU partners. They also point out that the media have not always presented the operational situation in a fully accurate manner and exaggerated some issues. For instance, the fact that France respected in all situations the protocols with regard to the required distance between ships and avoided any step that – albeit legal – would be considered as escalatory in such circumstances (like performing fire exercises close to the Turkish territorial waters) are factors that were not necessarily highlighted by the media. But they say a lot about the real situation. In other words, circumstances were not always as dramatic as presented.

- ***The Case of Cyprus***

Since 1974, Cyprus has been *de facto* divided between the Turkish-controlled northern part of the island and the South. In 1983, the Turkish-controlled part declared its independence but it was unequivocally condemned by the UNSC.<sup>33</sup> As a result, the breakaway “Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus” is so far recognized only by Turkey. Although not controlling a substantial part of its territory (38%), the UN-recognized Republic of Cyprus continues to act as a sovereign State, something that is challenged by Turkey. Since 2003,

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33. According to resolutions [541\(1983\)](#) and [550\(1984\)](#).

Cyprus delimited its maritime boundaries with its neighbors (Egypt, Lebanon,<sup>34</sup> Israel, but not Greece, Turkey and Syria), while Ankara denies Nicosia has the right to this, arguing that the Turkish Cypriots' interests are not respected in this process. As a result, Turkey considers that, as long as the Cyprus issue is not settled, it has the right to act on the behalf of Turkish Cypriots in the *entire* Cypriot EEZ, not only off the coast of the territories it controls *de facto*. This explains why Turkey has also conducted drilling in the maritime zones south of Cyprus.

Asked why France treats Cypriot and Greek claims differently, and is less ambiguous in supporting the Cypriot claims, the interviewees explained that the Turkish stance of denying Cyprus' right to proceed with maritime delimitations has no legal basis and is intolerable, as binding decisions by the UNSC do exist. Thus, there are a very strong legal grounds for France and other States to recognize the Cypriot maritime boundaries and have their oil companies operating there<sup>35</sup>, particularly as France is a UNSC permanent member and as Cyprus has been an EU member since 2004. It is also worth mentioning that most Navy officers seem to appreciate their Cypriot colleagues a lot, and cooperation with Cyprus is well-established.<sup>36</sup> Indeed, Cyprus has been a precious partner of France for decades, as it has provided valuable logistical support for French military operations in the Eastern Mediterranean. However, Officers 5 and 6 were clear as to the fact that, for the time being, there is no such project to build a naval base on the island. *“The Cypriots want to become a logistical hub for foreign warships. They see this as a way to increase their security: the more foreign warships berth in their ports, the more secure they feel, which is understandable in their situation. But all France needs is a safe and well served place for its warships to berth: the Lemessos and Pafos ports already satisfy these very needs. Actually, we are not that far from Toulon to need a naval base there”*, Officer 5 explained. For his part, without explicitly referring to Cyprus, Admiral Vandier recently clarified that, given the current size of the French Navy, it is not conceivable to open naval bases whose political significance would exceed the importance of their operational and logistic significance.<sup>37</sup>

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34. The Lebanese-Cypriot agreement has not entered into force, as it has yet to be ratified by the Lebanese parliament due to Turkish objections.

35. By contrast, foreign oil companies do not operate in contested parts of the Greek EEZ.

36. “Defence Agreements between France, Albania and Cyprus”, French government, November 15, 2018, available at: [www.gouvernement.fr](http://www.gouvernement.fr).

37. “Amiral Pierre Vandier – La Marine française au défi de l’Indo-Pacifique,” Ifri, June 21, 2021, available at: [www.ifri.org](http://www.ifri.org).

## What the French Military Say to Criticisms of Bias in the Eastern Mediterranean

In 2020, France's Eastern Mediterranean posture towards Turkey was eventually presented or perceived as “biased” and even as “anti-Turkish”, particularly in Turkey.<sup>38</sup> Given the above, the interviewees reject any alleged “anti-Turkish bias” that supposedly guides France's action or influences the behavior of the French military, which, in turn, would also influence political decision-making. They claim that, in 2020, France did nothing more than react to unfriendly actions and irrefutably unlawful Turkish activities. The interviewees actually explained that France's presence in the Eastern Mediterranean is essential to monitor who does what, and to establish well-documented and unquestionable facts that are then made available to decision-makers and can be exposed to partners. No indisputable information can be collected and used without a substantial presence on the field, and only France within the EU has the military capacity to maintain such a presence in the area. Accordingly, the armed forces draw conclusions and act only on the basis of well-established facts, following the resolutions of the decision-makers and according to procedures. They report the facts as clear and undeniable: it is Turkey which tried to upset a regime based on commonly-agreed and accepted international rules and values through its unilateral acts and *faits accomplis*, and orchestrated – or at least endorsed – the *Courbet* incident, which then triggered the French reaction. Some of the interviewees systematically recalled as being very important the fact that France's reaction came only after Turkish action.

Actually, the navy officers explained that France did not alter the fundamental principles and rules traditionally guiding its conduct in 2020: it behaved as usual. As Officer 1 specified, “*The French Navy obeys the double principle of ‘courtesy-firmness’. In 2020, we did nothing more and nothing less than applying this principle. We are not quarrelsome, but no one humiliates us. Obviously, the Turks are not used to meeting resistance. Thus, it was to be expected that they targeted us in their effort to challenge the rules and it was normal that, in turn, our engagement became firmer in safeguarding those rules*”. Explaining that there was no question of being “anti-Turkish”, a navy officer from the General Staff (Officer 7) reported, without

38. For instance: “Turkey: France's Macron adds fuel to fire, delays solution to East Med tensions”, *Daily Sabah*, September 18, 2020, available at: [www.dailysabah.com](http://www.dailysabah.com); “Turkey Accuses France of 'Bullying' in Mediterranean Gas Exploration Spat”, RFI, August 15, 2020, available at: [www.rfi.fr](http://www.rfi.fr).



further details, that, “*Within NATO, the Turks have made substantial efforts to present us as anti-Turkish*” – suggesting that this would make it easier to present the positions of France and Turkey as equally legitimate or illegitimate. “*But our reference is international law,*” he added. As another interviewee corroborated, “*The measure of our action is international law. Lawful and unlawful behaviors cannot be put on an equal footing; that would be way too easy. Attempts to present our reaction in the Eastern Mediterranean as driven by hypothetical ‘anti-Turkism’ or having taken place on a whim, obviously serve this very objective*”.

As evidence that this is not a matter of “anti-Turkish bias” but of principled behavior, Officer 6 pointed out that the current situation (as of September 2021) in the Eastern Mediterranean has evolved since January 2021. Turkey refrains from unilateral acts and *faits accomplis* like those undertaken in 2020. Both navies do interact in the Eastern Mediterranean without problems and their officers have cordial and professional relations when meeting each other. In early 2021, the Turks even provided support to a French minehunter that, for technical reasons, had to leave a NATO taskforce and, accordingly, it NATO status, to regain its “purely French” status. “*That’s a concrete example of brotherhood among navies. There is no animosity between us; in normal conditions the Turks are professionals*”, Officer 6 explained; “*They even made a stopover in Toulon recently, and we made some stopovers in Turkey, as NATO ships, while they now refrain from abusively reserving undersea areas*”. However, if Turkey were to slip back into its 2020 behavior, “*France can be expected to respond again,*” he added, “*because it is a matter of principle, not of mood*”.

# Why France Succeeded Averagely in Engaging Partners and Appeared to Act Alone in the Eastern Mediterranean

One would probably expect the principles that France claims as guiding its Eastern Mediterranean action to be consensual within NATO and, most of all, within the EU. Accordingly, it is hard to understand why France's only had mediocre results in federating its partners around the Turkish issue. President Macron himself admitted to initial difficulties in getting the existence of a "Turkish problem" acknowledged by partners.<sup>39</sup> Indeed, although the EU finally came to denounce unequivocally the Turkish attitude in the Eastern Mediterranean, the fact remains that many EU members kept an ambivalent diplomatic posture (see pp. 10-11), while none of those possessing a substantial naval power (with the obvious exception of Greece) displayed any desire to get directly involved in the field. For some states such as Spain, this was even more striking, as Madrid has even declined to participate to the EU operation *IRINI*, although it participates in operation *Sea Guardian*. The interviewees quoted many reasons for this situation that may sound familiar, although it is interesting to see how they are presented.

## The EU's Internal Divisions

Clearly, the first reason pointed out by the French military is the lack of a common EU strategic vision and foreign policy. As Officer 5 summarized, there are three main strategic challenges the EU has to deal with:

- The "Russian issue", a matter mainly raised by Eastern European countries;
- The South/Mediterranean flank, a traditional concern of France, by virtue of its geography, history and capabilities; and
- Migrations.

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39. M. Rose and E. Pineau, "France's Macron Says He Set Red Lines with Turkey in Eastern Mediterranean", *Reuters*, August 28, 2020, available at: [www.reuters.com](http://www.reuters.com).



However, according to Officer 5, these strategic challenges divide Europe, though they should not be seen as contradictory, but as complementary. Currently, EU and/or NATO members whose interests are not directly at stake in the Eastern Mediterranean are reluctant to adopt a tough stance towards Ankara, since many consider Turkey as indispensable in the struggle against the “Russian threat”, which constitutes a central and unifying issue for NATO. As Officer 4 put it, a Northern or Eastern European country, even if it is an EU and NATO member, does not really care about what happens in the Eastern Mediterranean between Turkey and other EU members. *“It is no problem to them. On the contrary, if they start seeking for Turkey to be sanctioned, they will create problems for themselves. As long as this is the case, I don’t think we should have many illusions about a common EU position towards Turkey”*, he stressed.

## The Absolute Prioritization of NATO by Some EU Members

The second reason why France could not federate the EU is the absolute prioritization of NATO *at any cost* by some of its members, which also happen to be EU members. This is obviously deeply resented by the French military. As Officer 7 explained, many NATO partners were uncomfortable with the *Courbet* incident because all they want is to safeguard the cohesion of the Alliance against Russia, at any price. *“We tried to explain that, as a matter of principle, some attitudes cannot be tolerated, and that the issue of values is central and not anecdotal. In private, many would understand our position, and even agree; but in public, they are eventually much more balanced,”* he reported. Another army officer (Officer 8) was less conciliatory. According to him, *“In NATO, there are some ‘Ayatollahs’ ready to forgive everything to Turkey in the name of the survival of the Alliance”*, decrying that some allies were even ready to accept a NATO label on the Turkish intervention in Libya, as it could be used against Russia, despite that, according to him, Turkey’s choices in Libya weakens the EU and divides NATO. *“This is unacceptable and it is no secret that we don’t appreciate this pattern at NATO: when President Macron referred to the ‘brain death’ of NATO, he was specifically denouncing this situation. We have an ally who doesn’t play by the rules, and not only does the Alliance do nothing, but it is France which is accused of undermining its cohesion”*, arguing that everyone at NATO was well aware of the exact facts regarding the *Courbet* incident. *“The militaries were ready to talk about it*

*seriously. But the issue was managed politically and swept under the rug, leading to minimization – and even denial – until the US decided to take Turkey down a peg or two, in December 2020. Only then did Turkey's behavior shift,"* he added. Indeed, at the December 2020 NATO summit, the then US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo used unusually tough language against Turkey, including on the Eastern Mediterranean issue, where the US is traditionally very cautious in criticizing Ankara.<sup>40</sup> And it is indeed a fact that, after this summit, Turkey's attitude changed.

From this point of view, the fact that France could not engage sufficiently the EU and/or NATO members in the Turkish problem does not mean that France's grievance about Turkey's behavior lacks relevance: instead, it is rather a political issue. Officer 5 argued that a look at how Eastern Mediterranean states perceive Turkey's attitude should be enough to understand where the problem lies, and that it is not a problem of being "anti-Turkish" but rather of Turkey's destabilizing and intolerable behavior.

## France's Responsibilities in Europe and in the World

A third reason why France is so determined to counter unlawful Turkish actions in the Eastern Mediterranean stems from its responsibilities in Europe, in international politics, and from its military status.

Indeed, after the Brexit, France's weight has *de facto* increased in the EU. First, it is now the only EU State to be a permanent member of the UNSC. As such, it has a greater responsibility compared to any other EU State as a keeper of the internationally agreed legal order. As General Toujouse pointed out, "*France is engaged in its quality as a permanent member of the UNSC as a guarantor of international law; transgressing it is simply intolerable*". Second, France has, henceforth, undisputedly the strongest navy in the EU. Consequently, it is practically the only EU member able to sustain a substantial and permanent presence in the region, including in the name of the EU. Even if the Germans agree with France's strategic position, they would not have the means to cope with such a mission, as they are almost absent from the area. According to Officer 1, in three years in the Mediterranean, he never saw a German warship performing a national mission; Germany's presence in the region appears, thus, to take place

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40. R. Emmott *et al.*, "In Parting Shot, Pompeo Rebukes Turkey at NATO Meeting", *Reuters*, December 3, 2020, available at: [www.reuters.com](http://www.reuters.com).

exclusively within the framework of NATO. Concerning other powerful Mediterranean navies whose vital interests are not *directly* at stake, none of them appear likely to confront the Turks if needed. To this should be added the growing absence of the US Navy that clearly left a gap after 2016.<sup>41</sup>

Putting all this together, one may simply ask, “if not France, then who?” Moreover, the fact that the French navy is a blue-water navy<sup>42</sup> means that France has to remain consistent as a world naval power advocating the rule of law at sea, and maintain a coherent framework of action: applicable rules and values cannot be different in the Eastern Mediterranean and in the Indo-Pacific, or anywhere else. Lastly, under President Macron, France has developed a certain vision of Europe and advocates the importance of European sovereignty. It would simply be inconsistent not to counter unlawful acts in the Eastern Mediterranean, which is also a European sea by virtue of Greece and Cyprus’s membership of the EU. This is especially the case after Brexit as, according to Officer 8, “*Now that the British are out, they seek to weaken the EU and to strengthen NATO by keeping relevant the ‘Russian threat’ at any price.*”<sup>43</sup> Obviously, Turkey appears as a natural partner in this endeavor. Like the UK, it aims at keeping the EU divided, while maintaining the need to safeguard NATO’s cohesion against Russia as the Alliance’s top objective, guaranteeing Ankara its status as an indispensable ally. This gives Turkey leverage to extort many Allies’ indulgence vis-a-vis its actions in the Eastern Mediterranean.

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41. The recent AUKUS military alliance between Australia, the UK and the US seems to confirm the tendency of the US to further decrease its presence in the Eastern Mediterranean.

42. A blue-water navy is a navy able to operate globally. Navies qualified as such are usually those of the US, the United Kingdom, China, India, France, Italy and Russia.

43. The interview took place *before* the incident between the British warship *HMS Defender* and Russian forces off Crimea, when the former went through the territorial waters of the Russian-controlled Crimean Peninsula. Regardless the legal aspects of the incident, as the Russian and British versions diverge, it was assumed by the British that the passage through the Crimean waters served a political goal and, thus, that it would trigger reaction on the behalf of Russia: D. Sabbagh and A. Roth, “Britain Acknowledges Surprise at Speed of Russian Reaction to Warship”, *The Guardian*, June 24, 2021, available at: [www.theguardian.com](http://www.theguardian.com).

# What's Next?

## The French Military's Concerns about Turkey's Regional Posture and Ambitions

For sure, the Turkish military machine is focusing the attention of the French military. As Officer 7 remarked, *“Turkish power is visible. The Turks show their power and determination; they have an efficient defense industry, real military power and know-how they can pass on. Turkey has armed forces that are not afraid of confrontation. It is normal that we pay attention to what the Turks are doing, but we do not see them as a threat; despite real problems, we remain members of a same alliance.”*

Yet, in the Eastern Mediterranean, France remains vigilant after what it has experienced in 2020. Officer 6 was conscious that the current lull in tensions might be temporary. Speaking about Turkish regional designs, he asserted that, *“As long as their doctrine remains at a verbal stage, we don't care. But if they repeat similar unlawful activities and unfriendly actions, France shall be expected to respond again.”* He is also conscious, like other interviewees, that the Turkish navy has greatly developed its capabilities. The naval power that Turkey is able to deploy came as no surprise. Yet, it was the scope of the Turkish navy deployment in 2020, especially off Libya, which is further away from Turkey than the Eastern Mediterranean, that caught the French military's attention. The navy officers agreed that the Turks demonstrated high skills in the optimal use of their material capabilities and human resources, with four frigates and an oil supply ship off Libya until September 2020, which is not easy to handle. According to Officer 5, *“This implies a high degree of ability in maintenance, budget and crew shifts. It was clearly a message. However, around September-October, we felt a loss of impetus in this effort”*, he explained. Yet, when asked, he expressed no doubt that the overall French military capabilities are still higher than Turkey's, even if it must be acknowledged that the Turkish armed forces have substantially changed from what they were 20 years ago. However, he still thinks that French and Turkish interests in the area are not basically conflicting and that such comparisons of military power are not necessarily pertinent. *“What is important is that, if needed, France*

*has undoubtedly the means to defend its interests effectively and fulfill its obligations as a keeper of the internationally-agreed legal order at sea as a member of the UNSC, the EU and NATO; it is up to Turkey not to be on the wrong side in this global effort”, he stressed.*

## The French Military Does Not Seek Confrontation

According to the interviewees, France has an overall, non-escalatory approach in the region. It tries to associate other partners in this effort, such as Italy (according to an interviewee, Italian involvement happens to reassure Turkey), and have them integrated into regional cooperation schemes. France does not wish to encourage an anti-Turkish axis in the region that would feed the “*Sèvres syndrome*”.<sup>44</sup> However, the interviewees agree that planning such regional cooperation is still premature, as Turkey first needs to refrain permanently from its pattern of unilateral actions and *faits accomplis*, while it is also the risk of isolation that may induce Turkey to rethink its attitude.

It is worth noting, according to one of the interviewees, that France has recently made efforts to engage in consultations between the Ministries of Defense/Armed Forces. There are two levels for such consultations. The first is the politico-military level, that may concern, for instance, the exchange of views on regional or bilateral issues. At this level, and despite the *Courbet* incident, France is reported to have undertaken initiatives to revive the dialog, but it is the Turkish Ministry of Defense that has shown very little interest in the process until now, although there has been no *formal* refusal on the behalf of the Turks. “*It seems that they prefer concrete actions on our behalf – without prior political consultations – to demonstrate a*

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44. The so-called “*Sèvres syndrome*” refers to the 1920 Treaty of Sèvres that dismembered the Ottoman Empire following the latter’s defeat in World War I. Although the Ottoman Empire suffered the same fate as other defeated multinational empires, such as Austria-Hungary, giving birth to nation-states, this treaty still has a particular place in the Turkish mindset and narrative about the “West.” Consensual and unifying among political parties and within the Turkish society, this “*syndrome*” consists in perceiving the “West” as systematically seeking Turkey’s isolation and dismemberment. What is interesting though, is that since 2016, R. T. Erdogan has sought to replace the “*Sèvres syndrome*” by the “*Lausanne syndrome*” narrative, referring to the 1923 Lausanne Peace Treaty between Greeks and Turks following the former’s defeat in the 1918-1922 Greco-Turkish war. The Treaty of Lausanne, a victory treaty for Turkey, is being increasingly depicted by Turkish officials and media as obsolete and Turkey presented as having been “cheated”. Indeed, this treaty sets limits incompatible with Turkey’s current designs in the Eastern Mediterranean. For more, see, for instance: S. Drakoularakos, “Turkey and Erdoğan’s Rising ‘Lausanne Syndrome’”, *Digest of Middle East Studies*, Vol. 30, No. 1, 2021, pp. 22-33. DOI: [10.1111/dome.12224](https://doi.org/10.1111/dome.12224).

*changing attitude towards them (for instance, a PASSEX).<sup>45</sup> They might seek hints to exploit diplomatically in order to show their partners and rivals that they are not isolated anymore. But, in the current state of affairs (as of September 2021), I cannot say that such a development is the most likely scenario”, he explained. The second level of consultations is military-to-military between General Staffs. They consist, for instance, in presenting and explaining each other’s activities in the region so as to prevent or lift misunderstandings. At this level, the communication channel remains formally open, but exchanges are reported to be very limited and are undertaken mainly at France’s initiative.*

In the operational field, the interviewees claim that Paris projects a non-escalatory message. France wants to avoid incidents between the two navies that could lead to escalation because of a misunderstanding. But the French officers are also very clear on the fact that avoiding escalation cannot happen at the price of a humiliation. As Officer 1 put it, *“In contrast to a tank or an airplane, a ship is a country’s first image far from home. It is the permanent expression of the state abroad. The way you behave represents your country. Therefore, either you are consistent and firm and you have your country respected, or you show cowardice and no one will respect you again.”*

All in all, it appears from the interviews that Turkey is perceived by the French military as a challenge, rather than as a threat, and that there is basically no confrontational mindset and temperament. From this point of view, the approach of the French officers (particularly of the navy officers, who meet the Turks at sea) do not seem to match with the confrontational stance that prevailed at the political level during the summer 2020 – and especially in the media. To the contrary, without being naïve though, they generally show a cooperative spirit towards Turkey, as long as the applicable rules and principles are respected.

## **Would a Consensus with Germany on the Turkish Issue Be Possible?**

Although this is mainly a political issue in which the French officers interviewed are not directly involved, they generally believe that a Franco-German consensus on Turkey cannot be considered as

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45. A PASSEX (Passing Exercise) consists in performing an exercise with another navy that is not pre-planned like regular drills. The main goal is to improve the level of communication and cooperation between the navies during operations.



realistic in the current state of affairs. It is not that they do not wish for one, as a matter of principle. But they were not confident that this is possible, as France and Germany share very different strategic cultures. As they point out, Germany has an economy-centered view while, in contrast, France is more conscious of power-related issues. Besides, they mention well-known structural constraints on Germany's Turkish policy, such as economic interests and the presence of an important Turkish minority in Germany. As General Toujouse specified, "*Some progress could possibly be made, but as a part of a series of mutual compromises on a large range of issues, among which there would be Turkey; but probably not as the result of any real convergence.*" This seems also to be the opinion of Officer 7. However, the latter points out that Berlin appreciates neither the purchase by Turkey of the Russian S-400, nor the growing Turkish intrusion in the Balkans, where Germany has well-established interests. These two points might therefore eventually constitute the basis to find a common ground.

However, besides the specific question of the Franco-German coordination within the EU, both Officer 4 and General Toujouse confirm that while nothing is possible without French-German coordination, this is however not enough, as many EU members (the "silent majority") are not ready at all to accept an EU foreign policy to be dictated by the EU's "big players". As Officer 4 puts it: "*At NATO, it is very simple: you can do anything if the Americans are with you and nothing if they are not. The EU is more complicated: Franco-German coordination is a precondition, but it is far from being sufficient.*"

Consequently, it appears also that the issue of a common EU stance on Turkey cannot be disconnected from what takes place within NATO, and that the Franco-American coordination there is crucial and efficient. According to General Toujouse, at NATO, any progress on the Turkish issue can be achieved only through French-American coordination, as actually happened in December 2020, when France's positions – that long remained scandalously inaudible to other members – were finally heard by the US. Given that on security and defense issues, NATO overshadows the EU, progress on the Turkish issue within NATO is a prerequisite for similar progress in the EU.

It remains to be seen what the fate of France's strategic ambitions in the Mediterranean will be, including with the recent French initiatives on the Libyan issue and the growing defense and

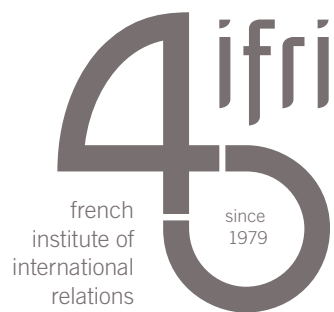
foreign policy cooperation initiated with Greece.<sup>46</sup> At a European level, will France manage to create a consensus among EU members and have its engagement in the Eastern Mediterranean accepted and supported as a concrete step towards a form of European strategic autonomy? At a NATO level, will the French engagement prove to be compatible with the above-mentioned Franco-American coordination as a *tacitly* endorsed “Eastern Mediterranean AUKUS”?

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46. J. Psaropoulos, “Greece Ratifies Landmark intra-NATO Defence Pact with France”, *Al Jazeera*, Octobre 7, 2021, available at: [www.aljazeera.com](http://www.aljazeera.com).







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