
Will Hollande's visit mark a new chapter in French-Turkish relations?

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The New Year could herald the beginning of a new era of friendly relations between France and Turkey. French President Francois Hollande has announced he will visit Turkey in January, making him the first French president to visit Turkey in more than a decade.

The visit is considered by both sides as a very important step to thaw the long-frozen relations between the two countries, which were traditionally allies. Their relationship hit a hard bottom at the turn of the century. There are two reasons for the breakdown. One is the Armenian Genocide and the other is Turkey's application to accede to the European Union.

France and Turkey, or more correctly France and the Ottoman Empire, have traditionally enjoyed good relations. It was mainly due to the alliance to the Kingdom of France that the Empire of the Sultans was able to become a major player in European Affairs in the 16th and 17th Centuries. And France was always the country that supported any liberal reform undertaken by the Ottomans. Paris also provided a warm refuge for Turks who were exiled for their liberal convictions. In fact, the Young Turk Revolution of 1908 was inspired by the French Revolution and by modern French nationalism.

Even the secular ideals of Turkey's Kemalist regime were rooted in the French concept of 'Laïcité'.

After the Second World War, traditional relations between Paris and Istanbul remained good. Many diplomats and political analysts descry ed the relations as excellent. The penetration of the French culture in Turkey was so intense that some even described Turkey as a quasi 'Francophone' state. But, as it always happens, there is another side to this story. The black clouds started to form at the beginning of this century when French-Turkish relations entered a deep crisis. One reason for this is France's opposition to Turkey's bid to join the European Union. But even though this explanation is correct, it is not complete. Aside from France's opposition there lurks another crucial issue: Armenia.

Relations between the two countries soured in 2001 when France officially recognised the Armenian genocide committed by the Ottoman Turkish forces between 1915 and 1916. In 2011, France's parliament voted on a bill to criminalise the 'negation of genocides recognized by the French state'. This provoked an angry response from Turkey, which responded by recalling the Turkish ambassador.

As regards EU membership, France had always been positive about Turkey joining the bloc up until 2004. Today, it is common knowledge that France (together with Germany) does not want Turkey to join. Though France has not openly admitted it, the reason for its reservations to Turkey's EU accession is that it could result in an enormous influx in the number of Muslims in Europe. France's opposition to Turkey joining the EU has provoked a feeling of betrayal among the Turks. But today, things have changed.

Turkey has proven its enormous capacity to move toward economic growth and has shown itself to be a regional superpower. Ankara has successfully

established ties with Russian-influenced Central Asian states, which will be at the centre of any energy discussion in the coming decades.

Furthermore during the last few years, the country has managed to build a bridge to the turbulent Arab world and has even shown the courage to criticise Egypt's new government and Syria's regime.

Without a doubt, Turkey has proven itself as a key player in this part of the world and across the Atlantic. Ankara is respected by the Americans, Russians and most-recently by the Chinese. So, it is rather difficult to understand why France has kept its distance from Turkey - a country with so many powerful allies. France's decision to align itself with Germany and oppose Turkey's EU accession has come at a heavy price. But the upcoming visit of the French president could turn things around.

It is clear that Hollande is not too concerned about human rights issues, despite the fact that the Turkish democratic opposition has objected to his planned visit. Hollande appears to be motivated by economic interests. With this in mind, any contracts signed during his visit to Turkey will likely bring about French smiles and a new-found benevolence towards Turkey.
