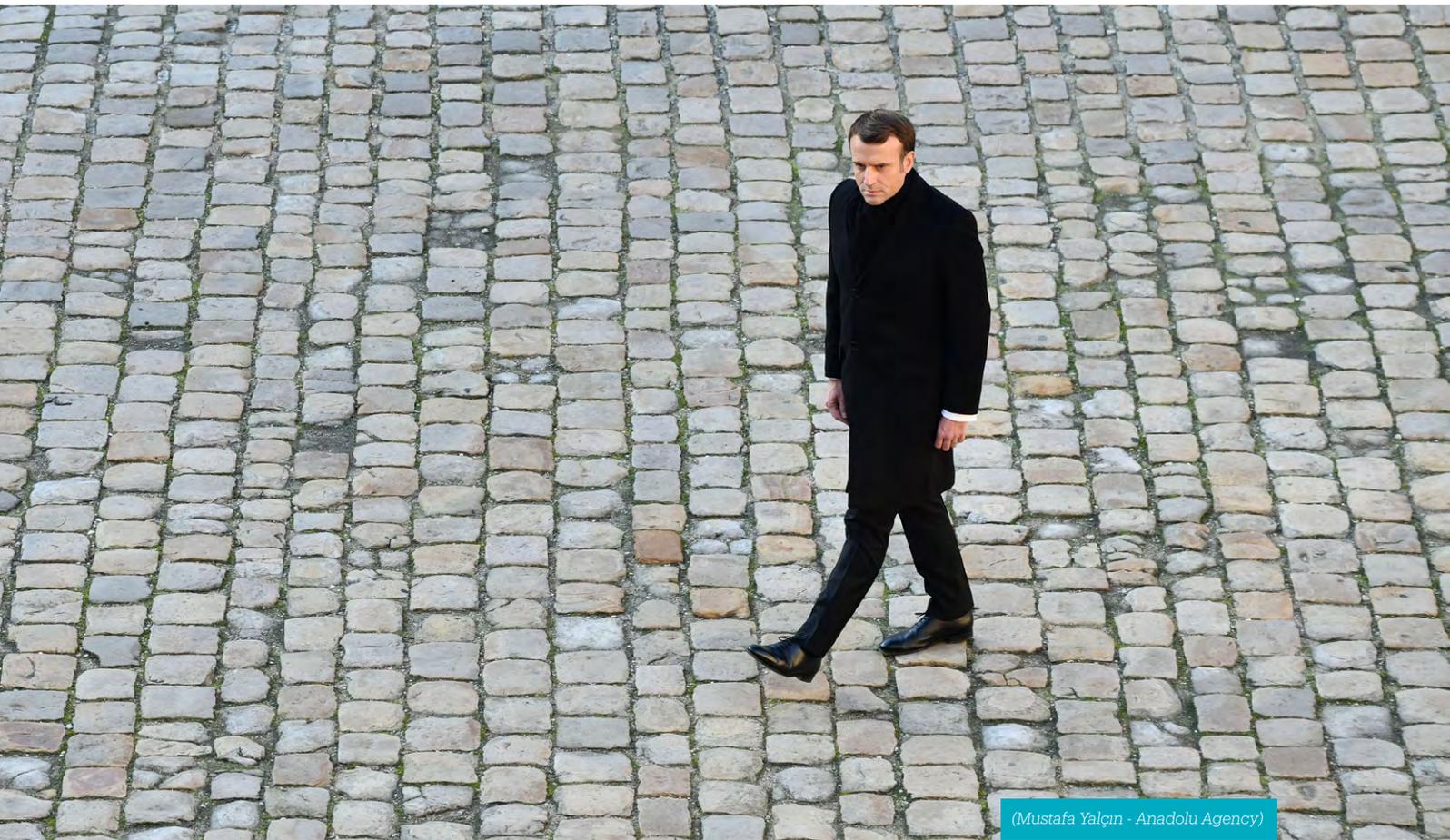


# Emmanuel Macron's Presidency: Vision or Mirage?

Dr Tarek Cherkaoui



(Mustafa Yalçın - Anadolu Agency)

**As tensions continue to rise in the Eastern Mediterranean, French President Emmanuel Macron has spared no effort to reassert French power in a region that he sees as core to the re-assertion of French influence. While the outcomes of his efforts remain uncertain, it has become increasingly clear that his influence, particularly in France, is increasingly being called into question. This Policy Outlook outlines the contours of Macron's presidency and examines the roots of both his domestic engagements and his foreign policy vision, particular as it relates to Africa, the Middle East and the Eastern Mediterranean.**

# The Rise of Macron in French Politics

Several observers have [highlighted](#) the contrast between Macron's relatively young age and inexperience in French politics and his fulgurant rise to become the youngest president in French history. Far-right presidential candidate Marine Le Pen [described](#) Macron as a "Baby Hollande," insinuating that despite his young age, Macron was cut from the same cloth as former president Francois Hollande, who helped him climb the ladder and encouraged the media to praise him.

Macron was also favoured by the [extraordinary circumstances](#) of the 2017 French presidential elections. For the first time since 1958, no Gaullist nor Socialist candidates qualified for the runoff. Candidates from the far right and far left managed to obtain a vote tally of 44 per cent. Facing the extreme-right candidate Marine Le Pen, Macron's campaign depicted him as an anti-establishment figure who would prevent France's drift to the far right. According to [authors](#) Michel Pinçon and Monique Pinçon-Charlot, "we have witnessed one of the most dazzling image-building operations in French political history. The mainstream media played a vital role in this image blitzkrieg. Without their support, without their connivance, it would not have been possible to propagate in such an accelerated fashion [Macron's] pseudo-disruption story that formed the strategic axis of his communication campaign: that everything changes so that nothing changes."

Notwithstanding his inexperience in politics, the 39-year-old Macron represented for many a protest vote against Marine Le Pen in the runoff presidential election, accounting for Macron's victory with 66 per cent of the vote.

Up until then, Macron's stock had witnessed a meteoric ascension from his days at the Rothschild Bank, the Attali Commission, then as interim to the Directorate of the General Inspectorate of Finance, passing by the General Secretariat of the Élysée to become Minister of Economy and Industry. However, despite such an impressive resume, Macron's trajectory is characterised, according to French author Juan Branco, by a 'lack of personality'. Branco [asserts](#) that "in the entire course of two decades, Macron left no trace of his personality, never committing to any responsibility."

Macron's swift ascent to power has not been the result of any political acumen or specific ingenuity but resulted from having powerful backers, who control the French finance-media nexus. Jacques Attali, a senior civil servant and advisor to President François Mitterrand from 1981 to 1991, [stated](#): "Emmanuel Macron? I discovered him; I invented him."

Attali was part of a network of politicians, business moguls and media tycoons that placed their bet on Macron's ascendancy to advance their interests. For example, there have been [suggestions](#) that Macron, during his tenure as Minister of Economy and Industry, facilitated French-Israeli billionaire Patrick Drahi's takeover of Vivendi's off-shoot SFR. Patrick Drahi's media empire [controls](#) a wide span of international media outlets, including the newspapers Liberation and L'Express, Stratégies, and TV news network BFM TV. Drahi's media have since been very [supportive](#) of Macron. The magazine Marianne [estimated](#) that in a period of four months, BFM TV had broadcast 426 minutes of Macron's speeches against 440 minutes for his four main opponents combined.

Drahi is not the only business magnate supporting Macron. Other industrialists and CEOs of big corporations, ranging from [tech corporations](#) to BNP and LVMH, have supported Macron's election campaigns and Macron returned the favour. In a book entitled "L'enfer [de Bercy](#)", allegations were put forward that upon his elections as president, Macron "left [his ministerial office] with the files of French Tech" to prevent the disclosure of Macron's cronyism by investigative journalists.

Such connections with the ultra-wealthy have continued to [characterise](#) the Macron presidency. In his first cabinet in 2017, Emmanuel Macron [surrounded](#) himself by a "government of the rich" with 15 ministers or secretaries of state millionaires out of 32.

Such an orientation, combined by the fact that he is supported by the rich and powerful, funded by mysterious donors,<sup>1</sup> and advised by neo-liberal think tanks (e.g. Institut Montaigne) earned Macron the [label](#) of 'president of the rich'. The fact that he took numerous favourable decisions for the most affluent 1% of the society made the label stick. Many of his choices reinforced such an impression: Abolition of the Solidarity Tax on the Fortune (ISF)<sup>2</sup>, a flat tax on capital income<sup>3</sup>, removal of the exit tax, and so forth.

1 This was the first time in France that a 'rookie' candidate collected so much money from individuals. Emmanuel Macron's party was new. He did not have access to public funding as the other candidates. Moreover, he did not have any real estate assets that could be used as collateral for a loan, so the banks were reluctant to lend him money. He, therefore, had only one solution to finance his campaign: to raise funds from wealthy individuals. His new party "En Marche" was born with a modest capital of 80,000 euros. During the presidential campaign, 16 million euros were raised from [800 donors](#), who made contributions of 4,500 euros and more. The donors' files provided by the Campaign Accounts Commission are anonymised but give some hints for cross-referencing. For example, some suspicious funds were raised from Tirana, Albania. In another incident, a Swiss couple donated 24,200 euros from different accounts to avoid crossing the campaign donation limit of 4,500 euros. Some of these mysterious donations were the subject of a legal [investigation](#).

2 ISF brought to the Ministry of Finance nearly 5.4 billion euros in 2017.

3 According to the government, this flat-rate reduction in the taxation of capital will cost the state 1.3 billion euros per year. However, independent economists speak of 4 to 5 billion euros.

The 2018 finance bill replaced the ISF with a tax on real estate wealth (IFI). While Macron tried to reduce the impact of such a change, the shortfall was much higher than disclosed. By leaving out securities - which includes stock market shares and bonds - from the base of taxable liability, Macron has offered a big gift to the rich people, whose assets are [composed](#) of these financial products.

The scrapping of the ISF has other important implications. For example, life insurance, the primary choice for financial savings in France worth 1.5 trillion euros, is no longer part of taxable income. Former Budget Minister Christian Eckert [asserts](#) that “the very powerful insurance lobby has pulled off a masterstroke.” According to Eckert, “the IFI replaced the ISF for this reason alone.”

Macron's policies created a 10.5-billion-euro gap in the 2018 budget, which amounts to 39 per cent drop in total taxes received in 2017. To compensate for this loss, the taxes imposed on ordinary people -- e.g. the tax on energy products (TICPE), the value-added tax (VAT) or the income tax -- were raised in 2018 in comparison to the same period in 2017.

In the meantime, fiscal pressures increased on lower-income groups, who saw very little -- if any -- increase in earnings. French economist Thomas Piketty [highlighted](#) the growing income gap between the wealthy and poor in France. As Piketty shows in his work, while the average income for the richest 1 per cent of people in France doubled between 1983 and 2015, the bottom 99 per cent saw income rise by only one-fourth.

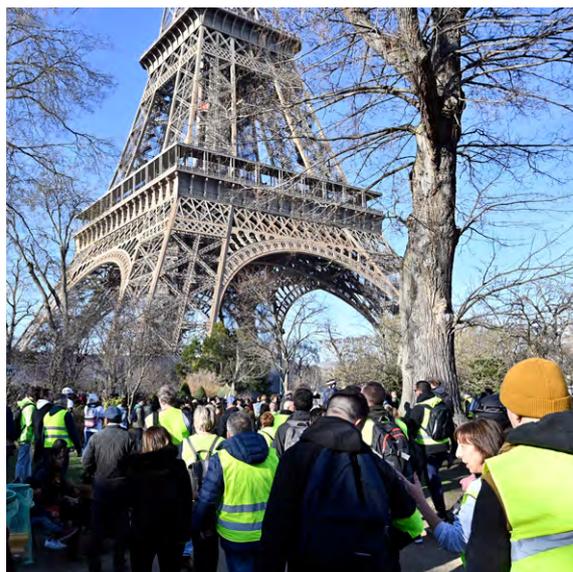
Such pro-wealthy decisions were taken at the expense of the taxpayers, while 9 million people continue to live [below the poverty line](#). This surge in poverty was the biggest since 2010.<sup>4</sup> These developments occurred against a backdrop of privatisation and a general downgrade of public services.

## The First Test of Macron's Presidency

Soon after he was elected in 2017, President Emmanuel Macron stated, in a long [interview](#) with the Guardian, that he was “not made to lead in calm weather”, but instead, he was “made for storms”. However, when confronted by the first real political challenge of his presidency, Macron was overwhelmed.

## The Yellow Vests movement

The large demonstrations that came in opposition to Macron's policies and the subsequent rise of the Yellow Vests



French yellow vests (Gilets jaunes) protesters walk near the Eiffel Tower during the 'Act XIV' demonstration (the 14th consecutive week national protest) in Paris, France on February 17, 2019. (Mustafa Yalçın - Anadolu Agency)

took the French government by surprise. What started as marginal demonstrations against the imposition of a new eco-tax slowly transformed into a widespread movement.

Macron's policies and ensuing communication strategies exacerbated the situation. Paradoxically, Macron's first reflex was to ignore the protests in their gestation period. As the movement had no clear leadership and no clear-cut representation nor spokesperson, Macron mistakenly thought that this movement would slowly fade away.

Bearing similarities with “Occupy Wall Street” and the “Indignados Movement” in Spain, the Yellow Vests movement was born ‘officially’ on November 17, 2018. Resulting from his erroneous assessment of the situation, the French president was extremely slow to react to developments and his silence only further fuelled the protesters' resentment. Being labelled as ‘the president of the rich’ did not help Macron. The protestors were already under the impression that Macron did not represent them. This belief exacerbated their frustration with his policies.

Author Christophe Guilluy explained this general feeling of marginalisation in his [book](#) “Peripheral France.” The feeling of being geographically, politically, and economically secluded was, according to Guilluy, shared by 60 per cent of the French population and was found among 80 per cent of the most popular occupations: workers, employees, small farmers, small artisans, and small business owners, who generally live outside of the globalised megacities in France.

<sup>4</sup> A study from the National Institute of Statistics and Economic Studies (INSEE) was published on October 16, 2019, entitled ‘Advanced estimate of the poverty rate and inequality indicators’. This study assessed the Gini coefficient, a statistical tool that calculates income gaps. In 2018, the Gini index increased by 0.005 points to 0.294. This jump in the Gini index indicates that this is the first time that so many French people have lived below the poverty line since 2010.

Twenty years earlier, a [book](#) by historian Emmanuel Todd on France's "social fracture" served as a theoretical basis for Jacques Chirac's presidential campaign. The widening gap in several aspects (material, cultural, spatial) between the elites and the rest of France was said to be at the origins of the country's political unrest. Todd prophesied then that it would ultimately threaten societal cohesion in France.

Despite all of the indicators, Macron ignored the development of the Yellow Vests. He remained uncompromising and did not speak directly to the French people about the issue for three weeks. The Yellow Vests protesters come from the [disadvantaged constituents](#) of French society: 70 per cent of them live below the median income, and 24 per cent described themselves as experiencing significant financial problems. Thus, they were the most impacted by Macron's policies. However, they had the impression of being snubbed by Macron. Subsequently, the Yellow Vests moved from demanding the removal of the fuel tax to calling for the dismissal of Macron himself.

Therefore, when then Prime Minister Edouard Philippe announced the suspension for six months of any rise in fuel taxes, it was considered by the demonstrators as too little, too late. The protests continued even after the suspension of the fuel tax on December 4, 2018, and the final cancellation put forward by the Élysée on December 5, 2018.

To make matters worse, Macron instructed the government to use a heavy-handed approach with the protestors. The level of police violence exerted on the demonstrators was unparalleled. There were more deaths and severe injuries than during the [May 1968](#) riots. The militarisation of police against the Yellow Vests demonstrators reached unprecedented levels, with police units using disproportionate force. The tactics used included targeting heads with the [LBD 40](#) (defence ball launcher) and launching stun grenades directly at protestors. Eleven people lost their lives in France, and 1900 civilians were injured with 483 [cases](#) involving head wounds, comas, [eye](#) and hand losses. Such excesses have been the subject of numerous lawsuits and have drawn the ire of human rights organisations.

The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) denounced severe rights restrictions on "gilets jaunes" protestors. Their experts [stated](#) that "the right to protest in France has been disproportionately curtailed during the recent "gilets jaunes" protests and the authorities should rethink their law enforcement policies to guarantee the exercise of freedoms." The OHCHR communique added: "Since the start of the yellow vest protest movement in November 2018, we have received serious allegations of excessive use of force. More than 1,700 people have been injured as a result of the protests across the country".

It was ironic for Macron, who wasted no opportunity to lecture other countries on human rights, found himself in the unusual position of receiving criticism from leading international organisations. Furthermore, the images of aggressive tactics deployed by French law enforcement further dented Macron's image. While the French president started his five-year term with a 62 per cent approval rating, his ratings quickly dwindled. Recent [opinion polls](#) (August 2020) reveal that 61 per cent disapprove of his policies.

## Deflective tactics and the use of Islamophobia

Macron's low approval ratings that followed the Yellow Vests episode and the fear of not being re-elected given the rise of the far-right led the French President to adopt a series of rhetorical ploys. These methods would allow the French population to overlook its economic problems (aggravated by Covid-19 pandemic and the government's [disastrous](#) crisis management) and concentrate on other issues. Among the key diversionary methods used has been the focus on France's Muslim minority. The strategy has consisted of amplifying, via the mass media, a crude Islamophobic discourse that creates the impression that France is at the risk of losing its identity.

The fact that the French Banlieues<sup>5</sup> did not [participate](#) in the Yellow Vests movement was not a mitigating factor that could have softened the 'othering' of Muslims in France. On the contrary, while the media's adoption of far-right bigoted references has been going on for decades, it has taken a turn for the worse under Macron.

Take, for example, the term 'ensauvagement,' which has been used by some politicians to frame Muslims in France. This term means 'to become wild.' It was used in the 12th



International human rights groups gathered at Fontaine des Innocents call on France to suspend its state of emergency and end what one has described as "abusive and discriminatory" measures in Paris, France on February 6, 2016. France introduced a 12-day state of emergency within hours of Daesh-claimed attacks that killed 130 people on Nov. 13. Parliament later extended it for a further three months. (Geoffroy Van der Hasselt - Anadolu Agency)

<sup>5</sup> Banlieues in the French context is a connotation for the suburbs' large housing estates, which host large numbers of youth from North African and Sub-Saharan origins.

century to describe foreigners, often depicted as uncivilised. There was a period when the word was used by some anti-colonial [authors](#) to condemn the practices of colonialism. However, the expression was recuperated by the far-right in the 1970s. They used it to vilify what they labelled as 'wild immigration.' Since then, the far-right has used the expression and its various iterations to defame the Muslim minority and frame it along the lines of animality and the notion of being '[sub-human](#)'.

Constructing 'otherness' appeals to national self-identification processes and the establishment of binary opposites of good vs bad and civilised vs barbarian are rhetorical ploys that allow deflecting attention from other economic and political issues. Owing to its colonial past, France has a rich reservoir of African and Arab stereotypes<sup>6</sup>. However, there has been a noticeable shift. 20 years ago, 'otherness' had anti-Arab connotations. Nowadays, it targets Muslims, [intertwining](#) racism and Islamophobia. The current over-emphasis on insecurity and blaming a general sense of societal insecurity on 'others' has at present religious undertones and targets the entire Muslim minority from all races and ethnic origins.

Another shift is also discernible. Racism and Islamophobia have become mainstream. For instance, ever since the publication of Laurent Obertone's [book](#) "La France Orange Mécanique," the term 'ensauvagement' has become fashionable and has slowly permeated the political tool kit of the traditional right. In 2020, Macron [euphemistically](#) used the expression 'incivility' on the occasion of the Charlie Hebdo attacks. Macron's interior minister Gerald Darmanin used the word 'ensauvagement' in an [interview](#), adopting the racist lexicon of the far-right and making the stigmatisation of the Muslim minority a de-facto state objective.

Such ostracisation of migrants and widespread trivialisation of racism occur despite the lack of empirical evidence. Many studies [disagree](#) with the hypothesis, advanced by politicians and media commentators alike, that violent crime is on the rise in France.

Macron's Islamophobic drift is not a mere tactical ploy. It is part of an on-going drive to re-shape France's national identity internally and externally. The exaggeration of alleged criminality by French Muslims allows the establishment of a climate of excessive repression that infringes on the rule of law and democratic rights. The media discourse is deployed for the purpose of convincing the majority to accept extra-legal measures as long as they target the Muslim 'other.' The savagery that is spouted in the official discourse creates the atmosphere for devaluing legal procedures in handling the affairs of the Muslim minority and paves the way for political violence to reaffirm the legitimacy of the French state and the boundaries of the officially acceptable French community.

## Macron's Foreign Policy

It is important to note that the domestic dynamics outlined earlier, including Macron's rise to power, his handling of the Yellow Vests challenge and the Islamophobic drift of the French decision-makers, have a direct influence on his foreign policy.

Just as the construction of an internal 'other' by Macron's government as a way to frame the state as an ultimate saviour, the creation of external 'others' is a way to position the state as a barrier against outside forces. Macron seems increasingly consumed by the idea that Europe is in danger of being [absorbed](#) by Islam. The 'fear of Islam' narrative allows the top echelon of French decision-making to extrapolate their interpretations of national identity and political sovereignty.

This script also allows observers to have the necessary code to decipher Macron's foreign policy moves, which tend to be confusing. Political scientist Bruno Maçães [concludes](#): "If you're confused [by Macron's foreign policy], you are not the only one. It could be that those of us observing Macron are failing to understand the subtleties of foreign policy, especially when practised by a virtuoso of the art. Perhaps all these pieces will fit together in the end, like in that famous last episode of the TV show "Lost.""

The 'fear of Islam' narrative is the code that helps to decrypt Macron's foreign policy. How could French foreign policy experts explain Macron's rejection of EU membership talks for North Macedonia and Albania, opening a window of opportunity for Russia and China to control the Western Balkans. Officially, Macron claims that the accession process requires reform, but he did not put any proposal on the nature of this reform. According to [Maçães](#), "the real reason for Macron's opposition is that Albania is a majority Muslim country and North Macedonia has a very large and politically active Muslim minority."

Macron thinks of himself as [a man on a mission](#). This mission is the restoration of the French place in the world, hence his campaign [slogan](#) "France is back." It is important to note that three of the main presidential candidates in 2017, namely Le Pen, Mélenchon, and Hamon, expressed very different visions of France. They were, for the most part, isolationist and anti-globalisation. Such competing views at this level mean that France's future direction is far from being carved in stone.

Macron, on the other hand, would like the French people to continue to adhere to post-war liberal international order, with France playing a [leadership role](#) within a newly energised Europe while adopting '[progressive neo-liberal](#)' interpretations of globalisation. However, as author Nicholas

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<sup>6</sup> Numerous racist terms are used in the French colloquial language to designate Arabs in France, such as "bicot," "naze," "bougnoule," and "gourbi".

Dungan [argues](#), “Macron’s worldview has [...] run into three especially intractable obstacles: Macron’s ineffectiveness in foreign policy, the fracturing of Europe, and the lack of progress in France—all leading, in one form or another, to his seriously disappointing poll numbers.”

Thus, the fear of Islam narrative allows Macron to push his vision of France’s role in the world. In the same vein, it legitimises the reproduction of power relations vis-à-vis the external ‘others,’ unleashing violent actions against actors overseas.

### **France’s declining relevance in the world**

The debates over France’s identity internally and internationally are taking place amidst the country’s declining relevance in world affairs. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, France played a central role internationally in realms ranging from culture to architecture, to education and bureaucracy. However, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, France is no longer among the key producers of knowledge. Its economic output was dented after the financial crisis of 2008, and the country witnessed some of its worst growth phases afterwards. This general economic contraction was made [worse](#) by the Covid-19 pandemic. Moreover, few observers around the world view France as an actor that is able to solve any diplomatic, military or economic issues of international importance.

Even the themes raised habitually by French humanist intellectuals have become lacklustre, perhaps due to the fact that, in the past decades, more often than not, France has arguably been on the wrong side of history. Rwanda and Bosnia exemplify such a trend. In the prelude to the Rwandan Genocide in 1993-1994, the French government [trained](#) the Hutu-led forces, supplied them with weapons even after an arms embargo, and offered them political and diplomatic cover at the UN up until the last days of the genocide. Similarly, the [French role](#) during the Srebrenica Genocide in 1995, whether behind the scenes at the UN or NATO or media-wise, suggests strong connivance with the Bosnian Serbs in their genocidal drive. The lack of empathy with people suffering injustice around the world has continued to raise questions about the contradictions between France’s political rhetoric in support of democracy and human rights and its policy orientations.

### **Negative effects in Africa**

French-speaking Africa, which was considered for a long time as France’s backyard, has also witnessed the rise of [anti-French sentiments](#). For decades, French officials relied on the neo-colonial concept of France-Afrique to maintain its influence in its former colonies. This [network](#) of French commercial, political, and military interests worked towards preserving the status quo. While ex-colonies have provided sustained access to cheap raw materials and min-

erals and opened their markets to French products, Paris ensured that friendly African elites remained in power. The fact that 60 years after acquiring their independence, the most strategic economic domains in French-speaking Africa are quasi-monopolised by French companies speaks volumes. French firms have controlling stakes in electricity, telecommunications, infrastructure, airports and ports. This [state of affairs](#) significantly inhibits the development of these countries, leading to a downward spiral of poverty and societal implosion. As a result, many in Africa have become increasingly antagonised by French policies.

Even European politicians have not been able to remain silent any longer about the ills of French policies in Africa. Italian Deputy Prime Minister Luigi di Maio [called on](#) the EU to punish France for its actions in Africa. He said: “The EU should impose sanctions on France and all countries like France that impoverish Africa and make these people leave because Africans should be in Africa, not at the bottom of the Mediterranean.” He added: “If people are leaving today it is because European countries, France above all, have never stopped colonising dozens of African countries.” He then stated: “if it weren’t for Africa, France would rank 15<sup>th</sup> among world economies, not in the top six.”

Macron did little to assuage criticism of his Africa policy. At a press conference at the G20 summit in Hamburg on July 8, 2017, the French President answered a question from an African journalist, who asked why there was no Marshall Plan for Africa. Macron’s response [included](#) these comments: “The challenge of Africa is completely different, it is much deeper. It is civilisational today. Failing states, complex democratic transitions, the demographic transition.” Subsequently, he said, “One of the essential challenges of Africa ... is that in some countries today seven or eight children [are] born to each woman.” Some [pundits](#) called these statements racist, problematic and arrogant.

France’s military operations in the Sahel have been drawing the ire of African commentators. As Daesh struck in Paris with mass terrorist attacks in 2015, the interventionist narrative for sending troops to the Sahel made perfect sense to French public opinion. After being elected, Macron was keen even more to flex France’s muscles in Africa and project force against insurgents 4,000 kilometres away from Paris. Thus, Macron [vowed](#) to increase the number of French troops in the region. However, the French government has failed to reach its objectives. After losing many men in the deserts of northern Mali, even Macron’s top [generals say](#) that a victory is impossible. Conversely, Macron has continued on this path, even when France is not in measure to finance the presence of its 4,500 troops, currently stationed in Chad, Mali and Niger. Macron had to solicit assistance from the UAE, Saudi Arabia and others to [pay the bill](#).

Successive military operations have made things worse on the ground. Consequently, there has been growing dis-

content among opinion leaders and activists in the Sahel towards the French presence. Succumbing to illusions of grandeur, Macron has not prospected other conflict resolution approaches. On the contrary, like a colonial chief, he summoned the Sahel leaders to Paris. Some pundits did not miss the symbolism. For example, independent journalist Bram Posthumus [noted](#):

“The big debate has been: Did [Macron] invite these five presidents, or did he send a convocation? This sounds like semantics, but it’s actually very important. Because if it is an invitation, [the talks will be] on the basis of equality. Otherwise, it seems as if these presidents were going to be lectured and harangued by Macron and that will make anti-French sentiment even worse because it will be seen as a public humiliation of five heads of state in the Sahel region.”

### **The creation of a new enemy: Turkey**

Although from time to time, Paris raises the issue of human rights, justice, democracy and the rule of law, in the post-Arab Spring era, the French government has more often than not sided with Arab dictators in their efforts to quash their peoples’ democratic aspirations.

### **France and the Arab Spring**

Understanding the current trajectory of Turkish-French relations necessitates familiarity with post-Arab Spring dynamics. The Arab demonstrations called for an end to nepotism and corruption, improving economic conditions, democratic representation, and the protection of human rights. Turkey positioned itself with the forces for change in the Arab World. In contrast, French authorities sided with autocratic regimes and played an important role in routing the forces of change. In this context, France allied itself with the UAE, supporting the Sisi coup in Egypt, backing Saudi Arabia in its war against Yemen, and supporting warlord Khalifa Haftar in Libya, to name a few examples.

By the time the Arab Spring started, France and the UAE were in the process of establishing an alliance. This process began in 2009 with the establishment of a French base in Abu Dhabi, the first French joint base in the Middle East. This base consisted of an airbase and a naval base that is capable of hosting a French aircraft carrier. This facility was the first French military installation that was not established in a former colony. It also allowed France to establish a footprint in the strategic Gulf region.

The alliance also consisted of France’s commitment to defending the UAE. There was a [security clause](#) in the agreement, “in which France commits itself to defend the Emirates in the event of a threat from a third country.” As Nicholas Fortin [argues](#): “It’s a clause whose details, unfor-



President of Turkey, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan (L) and French President Emmanuel Macron (R) attend a joint press conference with Russian President Vladimir Putin and German Chancellor Angela Merkel during the “Four-way Istanbul summit on Syria” in Istanbul, Turkey on October 27, 2018. The summit on Syria, hosted by Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, witnessed the participation of Russian President Vladimir Putin, German Chancellor Angela Merkel and French President Emmanuel Macron. (Murat Kula - Anadolu Agency)

tunately, have not been disclosed because defence agreements are not submitted to parliament.”

Meanwhile, France has made huge profits in arms sales to the UAE and Saudi Arabia. French arms exports to the UAE represented a total amount of 4.7 billion euros between 2010 and 2019, including 1.5 billion in 2019. The arms exports to Saudi Arabia [represented](#) 11.3 billion euros in the past decade. Therefore, France benefited from the bellicose policies post-Arab Spring of Abu Dhabi and Riyadh. Since then, the UAE has relentlessly crushed human rights in the region in its bid to silence dissent and peg back the region to the pre-Arab Spring era.

France’s arms exports are [violating](#) the Arms Trade Treaty (ATT), ratified by French authorities on April 2, 2014, which prohibits the export of weapons liable to be used in violation of international human rights law. Human Rights Watch (HRW) issued a critical [statement](#) about this matter: “Providing arms to countries repeatedly implicated in serious abuses, including possible war crimes, contradicts [France’s] goal to be seen as a global leader for human rights values.” Nonetheless, such a trend exemplifies, once more, the divergence between practice and rhetoric of France with regards to arms transfers.

Upon his election, Macron continued this policy, as this drive resonated well with his Islamophobic orientation. His government vilified constituents of the Arab Spring that were affiliated with a vaguely defined ‘Political Islam’. This biased rhetoric was used ad nauseam even when these forces actively [crushed](#) Daesh and other terrorist organisations in the region.

### **Turkey as a model in the region**

The Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi, Mohamed bin Zayed (MBZ), likes to think of himself as a leader in the Arab World. The problem is that he does not have any societal

project or economic vision to offer to the region. As journalist Bill Law [sums it up](#), the UAE “declared its preference for bombs over words.”

Turkey, on the other hand, represents a democratic model for the MENA region. In the 21st century, Ankara has [come to terms](#) with its multicultural heritage, both past and present. By reconciling modernity and heritage, Turkey is seen by many in the Muslim world as a leader. In this context, the rising [popularity](#) of Turkey’s president in the Middle East contrasts strikingly with the negative views about MBZ.

By breaking the [blockade](#) of Qatar and [preventing](#) the downfall of the UN-recognised government in Libya, Turkey has defeated two key objectives of the UAE. With Turkey actively present in more than one location in the Middle East, the UAE suddenly realised that it may be biting off more than it can chew. This reality check was essential for the UAE, which is a country with a native population of little more than one million people – roughly 10 per cent of the total population of 9 million. The remaining populace consists of expatriates and migrant workers.

Apart from its vast hydrocarbon revenues, Abu Dhabi is no match for any central player in the Middle East. To make up for such deficiency, Abu Dhabi funds other international forces to do its bidding. Sometimes, they rely on non-state actors, such as the mercenaries of [Blackwater](#) and Wagner. At other times, they pursue their endeavours via state actors. Hassan Hassan, from the Centre for Global Policy in Washington, [mentioned](#) that in 2015, “the UAE was pushing for the idea of helping Russia stabilise Syria and enabling the Assad regime to reclaim control of the country.”



Turkey's Oruc Reis seismic vessel, escorted by Turkish navy, is seen offshores of Eastern Mediterranean on August 20, 2020. (Turkish National Defense Ministry - Anadolu Agency)

## Tensions in the Eastern Mediterranean

The issue of the maritime borders between Turkey and Greece was frozen since 1996. However, tensions have been brewing since a series of unilateral moves were undertaken by Greece and Greek Cyprus. The latter signed a series of unilateral agreements with Egypt (2003 and 2020), Lebanon (2007), Israel (2010) in addition to their participation in the EastMed forum (2019) in complete disregard for the interests of Turkey and Turkish Cypriots.

Ankara viewed these moves as manoeuvres aiming to cut the country from its maritime sphere while preventing Turkey and the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC) from accessing their fair share of the region’s resources. Therefore, in the absence of any genuine willingness to establish a fair and equitable regional cooperation, Ankara sought to explore energy resources in its declared maritime zones. However, such attempts were not to the liking of Macron. The latter multiplied [provocative statements](#) against Turkey. The spokesperson of Turkey’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs was quick to [retort](#): “It is high time for those, who are in a delusion of grandeur, to face reality. The era of defining imperialist conceptions by drawing lines on maps is long gone.”

While Germany and NATO tried to mediate, France, Greece, Greek Cyprus and Italy, were engaged in military exercises involving ships and planes off the Greek Cypriot coast. Their purpose was to [deter](#) Turkey from further energy exploration in these waters. In the meantime, Macron requested EU sanctions against Turkey by alleging the existence of ‘violations’ of Greek and Greek Cypriot administration’s maritime zones.

Far from restoring the image of France abroad, such rhetorical salvos damage its standing, while leaving Paris isolated. Macron has indeed [struggled](#) to find backing for its aggressive approach from its NATO and European allies. Macron tried to compensate for this isolation by organising a MED7 Summit of southern European countries in Corsica. However, participants [reportedly](#) softened Macron’s harsher stance against Turkey, offering dialogue instead of sanctions.

Meanwhile, the UAE is actively inflaming the situation in the Eastern Mediterranean. Abu Dhabi seeks to open yet another avenue to put pressure on Turkey and strain its relations with some of the key players (EU, US, Russia). By linking Paris’ foreign policy with Abu Dhabi’s, Macron has dragged Europe into the problems of the Middle East. This linkage is deteriorating the image of France further. Replicating what happened in Libya, Macron is increasingly being perceived as a mere spoiler who acts on behalf of the UAE and the French military-industrial complex. The sale of Rafale fighter jets and frigates to Greece despite Athens’ economic woes raised the eyebrows of some Greek politicians, such as [Yanis Varoufakis](#).



(Mustafa Yalçın - Anadolu Agency)

The UAE is interested in the Eastern Mediterranean for many reasons. Besides putting pressure on Turkey, MBZ wanted the \$7 billion, 2,200-kilometre-long EastMed pipeline project to proceed ahead, an endeavour that cannot take place at present given the infringement on Turkey's rights as well as Turkish Cypriots' rights. One of MBZ's key motivations is to [undermine](#) his arch-enemy Qatar. The latter is supplying up to half of Europe's natural gas imports. If natural gas were to become available from Eastern Mediterranean sources, the European market for Qatari LNG would dry up. The East-Med project, however, faced considerable obstacles. The Covid-19 pandemic has reduced global energy consumption and with it the appetite for gargantuan investments that make little business sense.

## Conclusion

Macron's presidency shows an interesting trajectory. The conditions that led to his rise to power have had a deep influence on both his substance and style. His ascendancy was sudden and owed to the nexus of media magnates and billionaires that supported him. His lack of experience was exposed by the Yellow Vests.

Instead of representing the president of change as his presidential campaign pledged, his actions confirm the old French adage: "Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose" [the more things change, the more they stay the same]. Rather than tackling his country's internal problems and external role in a manner reflecting true leadership, Macron fell embarked on building imaginary enemies at home and abroad.

The choice of expressions, such as "ensauvagement," and attempts to create external enemies appear to be inspired by the neoconservative playbook. In the prelude to the War on Afghanistan (2001) and the War on Iraq (2003), neo-cons dwelled significantly on the binary of good vs evil, civilised vs uncivilised. The sub-text of this discourse

implies that violent, military interventionism is the only viable option. It also serves to insulate one's rhetoric against counterargument and rational challenge.

Being ill-equipped for the challenges of the position, Macron has chosen empty rhetoric over meaningful action. In Africa, while during his campaign Macron expressed [re-morse](#) over France's colonial past and promised to loosen France's tight grip on its ex-colonies, his time as president has witnessed [nothing](#) of the sort. At the same time, in the MENA region, Macron continues to be pulled by the UAE into the mud of Middle Eastern affairs. So far, apart from the big profits generated by the French military-industrial complex, France has not achieved its strategic objectives on the ground (Haftar's failure to capture Tripoli; the Sahel quagmire). Meanwhile, French society is increasingly divided by racism, xenophobia and islamophobia.

Creating external enemies could hypothetically work under certain conditions. However, challenging Ankara is a different ball game altogether. Turkey is a powerful nation that does not take threats to its sovereignty lightly. Rhetorical acrobatics will not play in favour of the French president. The problem with Macron's 'verbal volleys,' [as-serts](#) Bloomberg's columnist Bobby Ghosh, is that without achieving adequate results, the French president will lose credibility at the end. Ghosh estimates that Macron's "words are not going to break Recep Tayyip Erdogan's bones, and Macron will struggle to build an international consensus to use the economic sticks, much less the military stones to force a Turkish retreat."

All in all, Macron's initiatives have done little to improve France's international standing. The French president has other pressing issues at home, particularly with the Covid-19 induced recession. It is perhaps time for Macron to change his ways of couching political points and devise effective solutions to existing predicaments instead of inventing scapegoats and fueling discord.