

WHAT IS BEHIND THE SPAT BETWEEN TURKEY AND FRANCE?

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: Effect of policies and politics of developed & developing countries on India's interests

Relations between France and Turkey, two NATO members, hit a new low this month after Recep Tayyip Erdogan launched a personal attack on his French counterpart Emmanuel Macron following the latter's call for reforming Islam. Last week, France recalled its Ambassador from Turkey, for the first time, and Ankara called for a boycott of French goods.

The trigger

Turkey and France have clashed over a number of geopolitical issues in recent years. The trigger for the latest clash was the French government's support for *Charlie Hebdo*, the satirical magazine whose office was attacked by al-Qaeda-linked jihadists in January 2015 over its publication of a set of caricatures of Prophet Mohammed, to republish the cartoons. Ankara, under Mr. Erdogan's AK Party, has projected itself as a defender of (selective) Muslims causes worldwide, and had slammed Mr. Macron earlier over his push to "reform" Islam in France.

On October 16, Samuel Paty, a middle school history teacher in Conflans-Sainte-Honorine, a suburb of Paris, was beheaded by an 18-year-old Chechen after he showed his students caricatures of the Prophet. Following Paty's murder, the French government started an operation to crack down on Islamist organisations, and President Macron stated that Islam was in need of an "enlightenment". While paying homage to Paty, government buildings in several cities displayed the caricatures of the Prophet. While the French response triggered criticism in Muslim countries, Mr. Erdogan launched the sharpest attack on Mr. Macron, saying he "needs mental treatment". In response, France recalled its Ambassador from Turkey.

Macron's reform plan?

In early October, Mr. Macron outlined the substance of a long-awaited law which his government is planning to introduce to regulate the practice of Islam in France. In September, after *Charlie Hebdo* republished the cartoons when the trial of the suspected 14 accomplices of the terrorists who attacked the magazine office in 2015 and killed 12 journalists began, Mr. Macron had defended blasphemy, saying "the right to caricature is an essential part of being French".

On October 3, while unveiling the essence of the Bill, which the government plans to formally present in December, the President said the law was being brought in to fight "Islamist separatism", which is a "conscious, theorised, politico-religious project that materialises through repeated deviations from the values of the republic and which often result in the creation of a counter-society". It will crack down on foreign influence in French Muslim communities and allow the government to track funding for mosques from overseas. The government will also create a certificate programme for the imams and ban homeschooling.

Geopolitical angle

While the immediate trigger was the *Charlie Hebdo* cartoons, there is a larger geopolitical context to the rising tensions between Turkey and France. As Turkey, under Mr. Erdogan, is trying to expand its influence to the erstwhile Ottoman territories, France has stood in its way. In Libya, where Turkey is backing the Tripoli-based government, France has supported the Tobruk-

based parallel government and the military campaign of the renegade General Khalifa Haftar against Tripoli. In Eastern Mediterranean, Turkey has launched a gas exploration mission, clashing with Greece and Cyprus, while France threw its weight behind the fellow EU members and even sent French warships to the region. In the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict Turkey offered unconditional support to the Azeri military offensive, while Mr. Macron slammed Ankara's "reckless and dangerous" intervention.

In all these cases, France and Turkey emerged as two opposing poles in the West and the East, respectively. While France, the EU's most powerful military, is trying to assert itself under Mr. Macron, Mr. Erdogan's neo-Ottoman foreign policy is ready to pick up fights wherever it sees an opening. It was against this background, the cartoon controversy sent tensions soaring.

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