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# Emergence and development of the feeling of "turkophobia" in France among Anatolian immigrants and their descendants

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Abstract : The Franco-Turkish tensions of 2020-2021 have intensified the feeling of turkophobia among people with a Turkish immigration background in France. This feeling of being marginalized within one's own or host country has already been highlighted on several occasions since the signing of labor agreements between Ankara and Paris, like several other Western European capitals, in the mid-1960s. Turkish immigration to France has historically suffered from an image of lack of integration into the host society, where it has been described as an inward-looking community characterized by its *entre-soi*. Debates on Turkey's potential accession to the European Union have also helped to crystallize this feeling of rejection, particularly in France, where the 2007 presidential campaign was marked by the victory of a candidate advocating the non-European character of Turkish identity. However, people who consider themselves non-Turkish have also settled in France from Turkey over the last century, and in turn tend to disseminate discourses opposed to the country's governments - or even to its very existence - as a result of their own history of conflict with the various governments that have governed it. The aim of this paper is to present these different forms of opposition to Turkey in France, and the effects they can have on people who are originally from Turkey, or who consider themselves to be the product of Turkish immigration.

### **Emergence and development of the feeling of turkophobia in France among Anatolian immigrants and their descendants**

Introduction: The relationship between France and Turkey has steadily deteriorated over the last twenty years, since the emergence in the public sphere of debates on Turkey's candidacy for membership of the European Union. French society, like other EU member states, was shaken by a number of questions relating to the future of the European community in the early 2000s, both from the point of view of the broad eastward enlargement that took shape in 2004 and the referendum on the Constitutional Treaty in 2005. In this context of questioning, which could almost be described as civilizational, Turkey was the subject of passionate debate in France and elsewhere in Europe, in relation to its identity and its possible membership or non-membership to this European community.

The discussion was at occasions stormy, with references to the concept of the "Clash of Civilizations" popularized by Samuel Huntington in 1996, and a constant reminder of the religious characteristics of the majority of the Turkish population. Turkey's Muslim character is therefore considered by many of the French stakeholders in this debate as a criterion that is not in keeping with what united Europe. Although the concept of Islamophobia was not as much talked about in France as it is today, the fact is that this argument contributed a little more to the feeling of identity-based - and therefore visceral - rejection already felt by some French Muslims, particularly those from Turkish immigrant families.

France has been the second-largest country of settlement for Turks from abroad, in terms of number of nationals, since the signing of a labor agreement between Ankara and Paris in 1965, but has shown relatively little concern for the integration of this population into its society for almost sixty years. This lack of interest could itself be seen as a form of disregard for this population, as could the way in which French society viewed this immigration when it was able to do so. And yet, according to the Institut National de la Statistique et des Études Économiques (INSEE), Turkish nationals were the sixth largest group of foreigners present in France in 2022, with over 210,000 people. And that's not counting individuals who immigrated to France from Turkey, but who have obtained French nationality, as well as their descendants<sup>1</sup>.

#### An immigrant population marginalized from the moment of its arrival in the 1960s-1970s.

Relatively little studied and mediatized compared to migration from former French colonies, and even compared to populations from the rest of southern Europe, immigration from Turkey to France was initially thought of as temporary - both from the French and Turkish point of view. Indeed, migrants from Turkey to Western Europe throughout the 1960s arrived under labor-sending agreements signed with France - but also with Germany, Austria, Belgium, the Netherlands, Switzerland, etc. - against the backdrop of an employment crisis in Turkey as in those countries (Gokalp, 1973). Turkey was indeed in the midst of mechanization, and its most agricultural provinces found themselves with a surplus workforce that the industrialization of the major cities was unable to absorb (De Tapia, 2002). At the same time, the economic miracle of Western Europe was still in full swing, requiring ever more manpower to fuel it.

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<sup>1</sup> [https://www.insee.fr/fr/statistiques/2874048?sommaire=2874056&geo=FE-1#NAT1\\_V3\\_ENS](https://www.insee.fr/fr/statistiques/2874048?sommaire=2874056&geo=FE-1#NAT1_V3_ENS)

Turks from the central and eastern regions of Anatolia, on the margins of the country's Western development, were therefore sent to Europe as a matter of priority to train in Western factories, and also with the aim of sending part of their wages back to their families back home to contribute to the development of the local economy (De Tapia, 1994). For a country like France, the comparative benefits of this economic migration lay - as for its neighbors - in the immediate capacity of this population to meet its needs in terms of employment, while normally not needing to consider the conditions of integration of these workers, whose return in the medium term appeared desirable to both parties. However, despite the end of the Trente Glorieuses, full employment and the cessation of worker immigration in the early 1970s, a large number of migrants from Turkey decided to stay in Europe, and notably in France. This was not because these workers no longer wanted to return to their homeland, but because the economic and even political situation in Turkey at the time did not encourage them to consider an immediate return.

Following the 1960 coup d'état, the military intervened again on the Turkish political scene in 1971, before a third coup in 1980 and a further - albeit more subtle - overthrow of the government by the armed forces in 1997. Because of this instability, the European context continued to appear a more welcoming environment for certain Turkish immigrants and their families, who also began to join them in the early 1970s, with the introduction of family reunification policies - as compensation for the cessation of labor immigration. And this despite growing unemployment in Europe, and the difficulties of integration - particularly linked to racism - that were becoming increasingly apparent in their host societies at the same time. Having been for the most part the first victims of unemployment after the end of the boom, economic immigrants - Turks as well as others - turned to trade and crafts, often serving a clientele made up mostly of their own compatriots. This entrepreneurial model, described by some as "ethnic" (De Tapia, 1994), was a real economic success for some, but above all it was a lifeline for many, insofar as it enabled a whole section of the immigrant population concerned to continue living. Indeed, Turkish immigrants were often recruited by their employers in the host companies directly by village or province of origin, due to the very way in which the Turkish organization responsible for recruiting prospective emigrants functioned. As a result, Turkish workers recruited abroad often found themselves among people from the same villages and provinces of origin in their host society, developing even stronger bonds in exile than those shared by ordinary compatriots following the same migratory trajectory. Despite, or because of, their isolation as foreign workers in a country

with which they had few ties, they thus more easily recreated a bubble of socialization between natives of the same villages or provinces within - or alongside - their new homes (Petek-Salom, 1992).

These cultural and social ties were later transformed into bonds of mutual support, when unemployment and inactivity hit these migrants who could no longer find work in industry in the early 1970s. While this sense of community alone is not enough to explain the economic success of the Turkish immigrant entrepreneurs who went into crafts and trade after being made redundant, it is nevertheless logical that the first interested parties - and therefore the main customers - of businesses run by Turks were themselves Turks. Particularly in areas such as construction, restaurants and, more broadly, the food trade. A Turk is bound to be a more regular customer of a grocery store or restaurant offering Turkish products. And inversely, Turks who managed to develop their business sufficiently were more likely to recruit Turkish compatriots, as the latter were more familiar with the products they had to sell. The same applies to another economic sector, such as textiles, where many Turks found employment in small and medium-sized businesses run by their compatriots at the same time, notably in Paris's 10th arrondissement: In the 1970s-1980s, the Sentier district, well known for its sewing workshops, was an important point of passage for Turkish immigrants looking for work, and particularly for new arrivals. Although official immigration was suspended in the early 1970s, underground networks continued to operate thereafter (Ertul, 2009). These recruited Turkish would-be emigrants who continued to seek better living and working conditions in Western Europe, for the benefit of unscrupulous entrepreneurs - some of them immigrants themselves - looking for cheap, undeclared labour.

Moreover, immigrant job-seekers, whether documented or undocumented, were often obliged to have little regard for the conditions of employment on offer, both because of the scarcity of jobs available at the time, and because of their own lack of integration ; which deprived them of the networks needed to find a new job, but above all meant that most of them had little or no ability to speak the language of the host society. Having initially come for the short term, living among their fellow emigrants in parallel with their local communities, and often under little pressure to integrate from their employers or host governments, some Turkish migrants had no more than a rudimentary grasp of the local language. And yet, as they continued to work together and in contact with a clientele that was often itself made up of a majority of compatriots, their command of the language did not improve. Nor, with the arrival of their

relatives through family reunification and/or clandestine immigration channels, did their exposure to the host society improve. Thus, for a long time, Turkish immigrants in France were characterized as a population that stood out from the rest of the immigrant communities in terms of its "entre-soi"<sup>2</sup> status, due in particular to the greater tendency towards endogamy noted in most of the French sociological studies devoted to them. Turks in France were seen as living among themselves, working among themselves, marrying among themselves (De Tapia, 1996), and not making the effort to learn the language of their host society. This unambiguous characterization (Autant-Dorier, 2007), relayed by press articles, contributed to developing a feeling of hostility towards this population, replacing the indifference that had prevailed until then. Particularly at a time when xenophobia was increasingly evident on the French political scene, which was looking for foreign scapegoats to explain the end of the economic miracle.

#### From indifference to hostility.

This French view of the population of Turkish immigrants living in the country was summed up in a 2004 article in *Le Monde*, which described the Turks of France as "more Turk than Turk": "Frozen in their desire not to lose any of their culture, France's 400,000 Turks have not all adapted to the modern way of life"<sup>3</sup>. Outraged, members of this population denounce the temptation to amalgamate (Öztürk, 2006), reducing a group of several hundred thousand people to a few observed behaviors, especially in political debate. Marginalized, misunderstood because of their initial linguistic difficulties, and confused with other immigrant populations with whom religion is the main thing in common, Turks in France and Europe suffer from ordinary racism that is increasingly exacerbated in this period of economic recession. Arriving as workers at a time of widespread financial health, Turks, like the Poles, Italians, Spanish and Portuguese before them, will soon find themselves singled out as undesirables once unemployment returns. Culturally and ethnically more distant than immigrants from previous waves, their acceptance by the rest of the population is all the more difficult. Day-to-day xenophobia accentuates the marginalization and isolation into which newcomers take refuge. This isolation is even sometimes beginning to be seen as salutary when violent racist attacks occur.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> FRALON, José-Alain. "Plus Turcs que Turcs", *Le Monde*, 10/16/2004.

<sup>3</sup> *Idem*.

<sup>4</sup> This entire paragraph, and the following six, are taken directly from the research dissertation on *Les turcs de l'étranger au cœur de la stratégie d'influence internationale d'Erdoğan : Etude du cas franco-européen* defended at Sciences-Po Grenoble by the author of these lines in 2019.

In November 1984, a monthly Turkish newsletter published in Belgium devoted its first two pages to the murders of three Turkish nationals in France on November 11 and 12 of that year<sup>5</sup>. Firstly, a 20-year-old worker, Kemal Ozgün, was shot dead by a security guard in an Yvelines factory on Saturday, then an attack by an openly xenophobic gunman killed two people, Salih Kaynar and Abdullah Yildiz, and seriously wounded five others in a shootout near Nantes on Sunday. Shooting repeatedly at the terrace of a tearoom where the two victims were seated alongside a dozen other Turkish workers, the terrorist said he acted because he didn't like foreigners. "I'm unemployed while they have jobs", he even added, referring to Jean-Marie Le Pen's speech on immigration, in which he had declared a few weeks earlier that he was ready to "take up arms to prevent the destruction of France" in the face of an immigrant workforce representing "the greatest disaster for countries with low birth rates"<sup>6</sup>. A speech published in Turkey on the front page of the newspaper *Günes*, the very morning of the attack and the announcement of Kemal Ozgün's murder, was denounced as out of context by Le Pen, who threatened to sue the Turkish daily for defamation. The French President at the time, François Mitterrand, paid tribute to the remains of the young worker, while expressing his concern and "that of the French people" in the face of the violence that had been gaining ground since the beginning of the decade. The mayor of the town affected by the attack declared himself shocked by this unexpected tragedy, considering the Turks in his town to be "a peaceful community, as well integrated as possible for people from a culture so different from ours"<sup>7</sup>.

This deep cultural difference, presented as the main obstacle to optimal integration of migrants, and then years later as a disqualifying criterion for Turkey's eventual accession to the EU, is inevitably reinforced by this kind of aggression. Indeed, Turks living abroad are driven to take refuge in their community life, on the bangs of their host societies, where tolerance and security are guaranteed. Associations, tearooms and restaurants run by members of the community are the only meeting places regularly frequented by immigrants reassured by an *entre-soi* that they now legitimately regard as a sanctuary. In these closed meeting places, as in the private sphere, social reproduction and the transposition of cultural rites from the country of origin can only be encouraged. Living among Turks, getting their

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<sup>5</sup> COLLECTIF TURC D'ÉDITION ET DE DIFFUSION. "L'immigration turque entre deux feux", *Info Türk*, November 1984, pp. 1-2.

<sup>6</sup> *Idem.*

<sup>7</sup> *Idem.*

information in Turkish and living in the Turkish way, workers who have arrived unmarried have no hesitation in marrying mainly Turkish women. This endogamy is built up through marriages arranged in the villages and regions of origin during their return trips. These marriages, in turn, contributed to the expansion of the community and to the *entre-soi* attitude that increasingly marginalized Turks (De Tapia, 1996). The few mixed marriages that took place in the last century were mostly with Turkish women from other major European emigration countries. France is not the only country to have witnessed murderous racist attacks on its soil: Germany, where Turks represent the largest immigrant community, was also hit twice in 1992 and 1993 by neo-Nazi attacks on expatriate workers' families (Manço, 2012). The same sense of persecution and incomprehension can be found in Turkish communities across Europe's borders. This intolerance was then itself a factor of unity and legitimate self-closure for the Turkish population in Europe at the time.

These racist attacks on Turkish nationals in Europe - of which the examples given here represent only the most telling, and deadly, manifestations - are nevertheless prompting some of those most concerned to organize politically to denounce this situation, and also to make themselves known as a population with a specific emigration background. This is because the Turks of France are often considered only as Muslims, and are often confused with people from North African or Middle Eastern immigration, who are also victims of this xenophobia. Yet, in the face of racist violence, these populations mobilize to claim their right to live peacefully in French society, notably at the time of the Marche des Beurs in 1983. Often suffering from the same afflictions - xenophobia, unemployment, language-related integration difficulties, accusations of *communautarisme*, misunderstanding of their cultural and religious practices - but not sharing the same colonial history with France, which may partly explain the racism suffered by people from North African and Middle Eastern immigrant backgrounds, people from Turkish immigrant backgrounds wish to exist as such within French society - while, for some, also wishing to mobilize on behalf of people from immigrant backgrounds as a whole.

The opening up of the right of association to foreigners in 1981, with the arrival of François Mitterrand's first government at the top of the French State, enabled them to create structures in which Turkish immigrants who wished to do so could gather for cultural activities (Petek, 2009), as well as political or religious ones. Among these organizations, genuine representative bodies or interest groups began to form, often with a view to transposing the



politico-religious debates that continued to structure Turkish politics after the 1980 coup d'état, but also sometimes with the aim of becoming involved in French society as a Turkish immigrant or descendant of Turkish immigration to France. A form of integration into the host society, then, but one that can appear on the contrary as an even more advanced form of "communautarisme"<sup>8</sup> in certain cases.

#### Turkish-French friction at national and international level.

Among the militant associations formed at the initiative of Turks in France and/or Franco-Turks since the 1980s, some have distinguished themselves by defending interests relating to Turkey that may have been or may still appear to be in contradiction with the evolution of French society.

This is particularly true when it comes to the question of recognition of the Armenian genocide of 1915. From the mid-1970s onwards, and more particularly following the 60th anniversary of the genocide in 1975 (Ternon, 1983), the Armenian diaspora worldwide (re)mobilized to defend the memory of the massacre of their ancestors by the Ottoman Empire at the start of the First World War. The vast majority of this population, dispersed following the genocide, has been quantitatively present in France since the early 1920s. And while the first generations of survivors who arrived at that time long retreated into silence to heal their wounds and try to integrate, their children and grandchildren have decided to take action to ensure that this state crime against humanity does not go unpunished or fall into oblivion, at a time when the notion of genocide is back in the spotlight in France and internationally, with the condemnation of the Shoah. Except that, while Germany has acknowledged the wrongs of the Nazi regime and accepted responsibility for the Holocaust, Turkey, founded on the ruins of the Ottoman Sultanate, has not. Far from it, in fact, since successive Turkish governments over the last century have constantly developed a negationist rhetoric.

Initially promoted by the Turkish diplomatic network abroad, this discourse, which seeks to methodically deny the evidence of the genocidal nature of the 1915 massacres, also relies on the activism of some expatriate Turks. In collaboration with consular representations in their host country, some Turkish personalities or those of Turkish origin who are particularly well

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<sup>8</sup> BONZON, Ariane. "Municipales : les Franco-Turcs de Strasbourg font-ils de l'entrisme électoral ?", *Slate*, 03/23/2014, consulted online on 09/21/2023. <https://www.slate.fr/france/84909/municipales-strasbourg-liste-turcs>

integrated into their host society become involved in associations or organizations to lobby on these issues. Often enjoying a certain aura in their professional circles, these claimsmakers (Cobb & Elder, 1972) put their legitimacy at the service of Turkish political discourse by organizing demonstrations to prevent the adoption in 2012 of a French law criminalizing the denial of the Armenian genocide<sup>9</sup>: This is particularly true of cardiologist Demir Onger, President of the Centre Culturel Anatolie in Paris, who was one of the co-organizers of this event and who was invited to speak at the French Senate to express the views of "the Turkish community in France"<sup>10</sup> at the time of the debates on the adoption of this law, which ultimately failed. Although he is a doctor and head of an association whose main activity to this day remains teaching the Turkish language, he was also invited to take part in a book bringing together French and Turkish experts - including academics - on relations between the two countries (Haydar, 2020), to write a chapter denouncing Armenian activism in France (Onger, 2020)... This commitment enables him to be close to members of the Turkish diplomatic corps [interview conducted with him on June 27, 2022], but also to find among French supporters of Turkish negationist claims who are able to put their own legitimacy at the service of this discourse. One example is Pierre Nora, historian and member of the Académie Française, himself known for his polemical stance on the Armenian genocide.

A model of Turkish commitment and integration into French society, Onger also partners with the Turkish Embassy in Paris to denounce the "Kurdish lobby"<sup>11</sup> in France. Another hereditary enemy of the Turkish state, Kurdish militancy is also active among French public authorities, with whom the relationship remains ambiguous (Carcèlès, 2023). Many associations working on issues relating to Turkey in France firmly and openly denounce the French state's alleged support for Kurdish activists in exile on its territory and in the Middle East. To this end, these relays of the Turkish government's discourse do not hesitate to adopt the State's elements of language (Carcèlès, 2023), considering all defenders of the Kurdish cause as potential terrorists, due to their potential links with the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK).

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<sup>9</sup> MEYNIAL, Claire. "Les Loups sont entrés dans Paris", *Le Point*, 03/29/2012, consulted online on 09/21/2023. [https://www.lepoint.fr/monde/les-loups-sont-entres-dans-paris-29-03-2012-1699782\\_24.php](https://www.lepoint.fr/monde/les-loups-sont-entres-dans-paris-29-03-2012-1699782_24.php)

<sup>10</sup> "Loi de censure arménienne : Allocution au Sénat du Dr. Demir ONGER, représentant de la communauté turque de France", *Turquie News*, 01/12/2012, consulted online on 11/14/2022. <https://www.turquie-news.com/allocution-au-senat-du-dr-demir-onger>

<sup>11</sup> BONZON, Ariane. "İsmail Hakkı Musa, un ambassadeur turc bien renseigné", *Slate*, 03/29/2018, consulted online on 11/14/2022. <https://www.slate.fr/story/159640/turquie-portrait-ismail-hakki-musa-ambassadeur-france-renseignement-mit>

In 2020, the French President reacted by denouncing "Turkey's interference in France"<sup>12</sup>, as part of the presentation of a bill against separatism, aimed at combating political and religious organizations deemed to promote interests contrary to those of the French Republic. Turkish religious institutions are particularly targeted in this context, as are militant networks operating in France according to a logic considered to be *communautariste*. In 2020, the Grey Wolves movement, an offshoot of the Turkish Nationalist Action Party (MHP), was officially dissolved by a decree issued by the French Ministry of the Interior<sup>13</sup>. And the following year, two religious organizations linked to Turkey were singled out for refusing to sign the new charter on secularism put in place by the representative bodies of the Muslim faith with the French state<sup>14</sup>. These cases, which were widely reported in the French and Turkish media, reinforced the feeling that there was a problem with Turkey and Turks in France, which was increasingly perceived as a kind of turkophobia by those concerned.

Conclusion: The feeling of turkophobia is therefore based first of all on the complex integration of individuals from Turkish migration in France, as well as on the development of the feeling of Islamophobia in the country. But it is also fueled by the Turkish head of state, and his supporters, within the framework of an anti-Western rhetoric, as much as in relation to a personal antagonism with his French counterpart. The latter, himself surfed on the rise of nationalism in France, and following the continuity of the policy of his predecessors, in relation to secularism and the Armenian or Kurdish demands, which are straining Turkey, as well as most of its nationals, a part of whom live in France.

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<sup>12</sup> BONZON, Ariane. "Le président Macron veut lutter contre les ingérences de la Turquie en France", *Slate*, 02/18/2020, consulted online on 09/21/2023. <https://www.slate.fr/story/187575/mulhouse-macron-ingerence-turquie-communautarisme-separatisme-identitaire>

<sup>13</sup> "Le gouvernement annonce la dissolution des « Loups gris », mouvement ultranationaliste turc", *AFP*, 11/02/2020, consulted online on 09/21/2023. [https://www.lemonde.fr/politique/article/2020/11/02/le-gouvernement-annonce-la-dissolution-des-loups-gris-mouvement-ultranationaliste-turc\\_6058211\\_823448.html#:~:text=Turquie-.Le%20gouvernement%20annonce%20la%20dissolution%20des%20«%20Loups%20gris%20»%2C%20mouvement,traitement%20des%20musulmans%20en%20France.](https://www.lemonde.fr/politique/article/2020/11/02/le-gouvernement-annonce-la-dissolution-des-loups-gris-mouvement-ultranationaliste-turc_6058211_823448.html#:~:text=Turquie-.Le%20gouvernement%20annonce%20la%20dissolution%20des%20«%20Loups%20gris%20»%2C%20mouvement,traitement%20des%20musulmans%20en%20France.)

<sup>14</sup> POYET, Stanislas. "Qui sont les trois associations qui refusent de signer la charte de l'islam ?", *Le Figaro*, 01/21/2021, consulted online on 09/21/2023. <https://www.lefigaro.fr/actualite-france/qui-sont-les-trois-associations-qui-refusent-de-signer-la-charte-de-l-islam-20210121>

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