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France and Iran’s Rivalry in the Middle East: Strategies, Interactions, and Consequences

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Abstract

This study argues that France has recently sought to reassert itself as a power in the Middle East, North Africa and the Eastern Mediterranean (MENA), especially in its former colonies. In this context, France’s quest for “Pax Mediterranea” under the leadership of Emmanuel Macron, which has intensified its political-military initiatives in the MENA region, is analyzed through the rivalry between Paris and Tehran in Lebanon, Iraq and Syria, which are considered as Iran’s spheres of influence in the Middle East. In this context, it is possible to explain the ups and downs of France-Iran relations from a realist perspective based on geopolitical competition, concrete threat perceptions and military-economic factors. Within the framework of neo-realist theory, which emphasizes the need to prevent the rise of regional hegemonic powers, this study argues that France’s concern about Iran’s growing influence in the region, the conflict of interests they face at the regional level and Iran’s efforts to acquire nuclear weapons are the most important reasons for the unfriendly relations between the two countries.

Keywords: France, Iran, Lebanon, Iraq, Syria.

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Fransa ve İran'ın Ortadoğu'da Rekabeti: Stratejiler, Etkileşimler ve Sonuçlar

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Öz

Bu çalışma Fransa'nın Ortadoğu, Kuzey Afrika ve Doğu Akdeniz'de (MENA) son dönemde yeniden bir güç olma arayışında olduğunu ve özellikle eski sömürgesi ülkelerde yeniden nüfuzunu pekiştirmek istediğini öne sürmektedir. Bu bağlamda MENA bölgesinde siyasi-askeri girişimlerini yoğunlaştıran Emmanuel Macron liderliğindeki Fransa'nın "Pax Mediterranea" arayışları, Paris ve Tahran'ın Ortadoğu'da İran'ın nüfuz alanı olarak kabul edilen Lübnan, Irak ve Suriye'deki rekabeti üzerinden analiz edilmektedir. Bu bağlamda Fransa-İran ilişkilerinin inişli çıkışlı seyrini jeopolitik rekabet, somut tehdit algıları ve askeri-ekonomik unsurlara dayalı realist bir perspektiften açıklamak mümkündür. Bu çalışma, bölgesel hegemonik güçlerin yükselişinin önlenmesi gerekliliğini vurgulayan neo-realist teori çerçevesinde Fransa'nın İran'ın bölgede artan etkisinden duyduğu endişenin, bölgesel düzeyde yaşadıkları çıkar çatışmasının ve İran'ın nükleer silah edinme çabalarının iki ülke arasındaki dostane olmayan ilişkilerin en önemli nedenlerini oluşturduğunu savunmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Fransa, İran, Lübnan, Irak, Suriye.

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1. Introduction

The concept that France remains a major power in the Middle East, North Africa, and the Eastern Mediterranean has been upheld by French politicians for a prolonged period (Cook, 2020). In this regard, France's regional policy is built upon three fundamental principles: first, a human rights discourse that supports the opposition in Syria and justifies France's intervention in Libya; second, a security logic that emphasizes the importance of combating terrorism and radical Islam; and third, an economic strategy that seeks to align alliances and discourses with economic interests (Sayle, 2017). At the end of 2010, with the Arab Popular Movements, these parameters and priorities became inconsistent with the policies pursued in different countries, and France's policy in the region, caught between its various commitments, gradually weakened (El Karoui, 2017). Moreover, due to its diminishing military capabilities, France is unable to meet expectations in resolving crises and conflicts and is dependent on stakeholders who share its interests and are inclined towards a common operational approach (Kempin, 2021).

The discourse of "Pax Mediterranea" led by Emmanuel Macron aims to revive France's influence in countries where it established colonial regimes in the past, particularly in Syria and Lebanon, and intensifies its political-military initiatives in the Mediterranean region. It is noteworthy due to France's past colonial rule in countries like Lebanon, Tunisia, Morocco, and Algeria, which makes France's recent loss of influence and power in the Mediterranean region the main external reason for this orientation. France aims to position itself as one of the dominant actors in North Africa and the Middle East, and its main realpolitik concern is not to be excluded from the energy equation in the Mediterranean and the Middle East (Yetim, 2020; Osiewicz, 2022). In this context, Paris is seen to compete with Tehran for influence in areas such as Lebanon, Iraq, and Syria.

The nuclear issue and the competition in Iran's spheres of influence play a decisive role in Paris' relations with Tehran. In this respect, France's current approach towards Iran dates back to former President Nicolas Sarkozy [2007-2012], who launched a new Middle East policy. After 2007, France's distancing from Germany and its rapprochement with British positions contributed to the deterioration of bilateral relations between France and Iran. France's attitude towards Iran has evolved from a search

for a balance between commercial interests and non-proliferation to an uncompromising desire to succeed in blocking Iran's nuclear progress, even if it means sacrificing commercial interests (Makinsky, 2021). As a result, France has become the state that has taken the most advanced steps at the European level in the establishment of unilateral European sanctions, particularly concerning limiting the transfer of bilateral technologies (civilian and military) to Iran.

The dimension of the European Union (EU) should also be considered in the context of France-Iran relations. For Iran, Europe has been recognized over the last century and a half as a shield against both potential threats to Iran's national security and foreign enemies to Iran's sovereignty and national interests. For example, when the country was divided into spheres of influence by Britain and Russia in the 19th century, Iran played the French card. It sought Britain's diplomatic assistance in the early 20th century to counter the military danger posed by both Tsarist Russia and the Soviet Union. In the 1960s and 1970s, the Pahlavi regime expanded its relations with Europe to reduce its political and economic dependence on the United States (Therme, 2023). In the last 44 years, the Islamic Republic has also made many efforts to maintain and develop its relations with Europe to reduce the political and economic pressure from US administrations.

A realist viewpoint that takes geopolitical rivalry, actual threat perceptions, and military-economic variables into account can explain the ups and downs in France-Iran relations. This article contends that France's worries about Iran's expanding influence in the region, conflicts of interest at the regional level, and Iran's efforts to develop nuclear weapons are the main causes of the antagonistic relations between the two countries. This argument is made within the context of neo-realist theory, which emphasizes the need to prevent the rise of regional hegemonic powers. The possession of nuclear weapons by a state aspiring to hegemonic power status in the fragile region of the Middle East would pose a significant threat, and some extra-regional powers would be forced to confront this threat. Therefore, containing Iran is on the agenda of France as well as the United States. Although France has traditionally taken a more moderate stance on Iran than the United States, the threats posed by the "axis of resistance" (the Shiite crescent) and their implications for France should be carefully assessed. Iran can pose a direct threat to the countries south of the Persian Gulf and a threat

to Israel through the proximity of the groups it supports. Moreover, Iran could jeopardize international security by controlling energy flows and becoming a nuclear state. This article will contextualize recent Franco-Iranian relations and analyze the areas of competition pursued between Paris and Tehran in the Middle East. First, the article will analyze France's new policy towards Iran in the aftermath of the 1979 Islamic Revolution to trace the evolution of its foreign policy approach following the regime change. It will then focus on France's view of Iran's nuclear program and its diplomatic efforts in the nuclear crisis. The main body of the article, which is the areas of rivalry between France and Iran, will be analyzed in terms of the policies pursued in Lebanon, Iraq, and Syria and their consequences.

2. France's Iran Policy after the Islamic Revolution

Historically, France's influence in the Middle East was predominantly associated with the Arab states, while Iran was under the influence of Britain and Russia until the end of the Second World War, and then the United States. In the 1970s, France's economic and trade relations with Iran expanded as Iran's financial situation improved thanks to increased oil revenues. However, France's influence was limited compared to that of the US and the UK. (Smith, 2005) After the 1979 Islamic Revolution, France had good reasons to expect a close political and economic relationship with the new government in Tehran. France hosted Ayatollah Khomeini in Paris for four months and declared its neutrality in the conflict between Khomeini and the Shah. (Tarock, 1999, p. 45) But, in the early 1980s, relations between Tehran and Paris became strained due to resistance movements organized by some members of the Pahlavi family, politicians, army generals of the old regime, and Iranian dissidents who had fled to France. They aimed to overthrow the new regime and received political asylum and support from France. The first indication of difficulty emerged when France granted political asylum to Shapour Bakhtiar. Later, in 1981, Iran's first President Abolhasan Bani Sadr, and Massoud Rajavi, leader of the radical Mujahedin Khalq, joined forces with other Iranian dissidents in Paris. Tehran accused them of inciting against Iran, but the French authorities did nothing to prevent their activities (Naguibzadeh, 2016). In turn, France accused the new regime in Iran of sponsoring "terrorism" in France. Tensions escalated when Iran prevented 157 French citizens in

Iran from leaving the country, prompting France to engage in a series of negotiations with Iran. The negotiations culminated in Tehran allowing the French to leave Iran (Tarock, 1999, p. 46).

The period of peace in Franco-Iranian relations was short-lived. Paris once again became the hub of Iranian dissidents, ranging from radical republicans to liberal constitutionalists and monarchists. The assassination of Prince Shahriyar Shafiq, Shah's twin sister Princess Ashraf's son, in Paris in 1979, allegedly by Iranian regime agents, marked the beginning of a series of violent incidents. Shapour Bakhtiar, the Shah's last prime minister, was assassinated at his home in Paris in 1980, and General Ghulam Hossein Ovaisi, the former Commander of the Land Forces and Martial Law, was assassinated in February 1984. The presence of opposition groups in France intensified the tension between Paris and Tehran. Abolhassan Bani Sadr and his associates were granted political asylum on the condition that they did not engage in political activities, and Iran's request for their extradition was denied. Anti-French demonstrations were organized in Tehran, and ambassadors were mutually withdrawn. French citizens were advised to leave Iran (Parsons, 1989, p. 224).

In 1981, France's decision to give Mirage F-1 aircraft to Iraq, which Iran considered an act of war, and to grant asylum to regime opponents, fueled Tehran's resentment towards Paris. Meanwhile, France yielded to Iranian pressure to release three missile launch boats ordered by the Shah. France's increasingly pro-Iraqi stance drew the ire of Tehran, and the events that followed brought Paris-based conspiracies to the fore. In 1983, France lent Iraq five Super-Etendard aircraft equipped with Exocet missiles, which made a significant difference to Iraqi capabilities, particularly in the "tanker war" and attacks on oil installations on the Iranian side of the Gulf (Parsons, 1989, p. 226). In 1984, a bomb exploded at Tehran train station, killing 18 people and injuring 300 others. Parliament Speaker Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani accused France of harboring criminals. At the same time, an Air France plane was hijacked in Tehran, but the hijackers' demand for the release of those arrested for the 1980 attack on Bakhtiar was not met, and the incident ended peacefully (Parsons, 1989).

In July 1988, Paris and Tehran initiated talks that led to the reestablishment of diplomatic relations, shortly before the Iran-Iraq war ended. As anticipated, high-level commercial and economic delegations from both

nations soon visited each other's capitals, resulting in the signing of numerous commercial and technical agreements in the years that followed. Of these agreements, the most significant and controversial was the \$2 billion consortium deal inked in September 1997 between France's Total and the National Iranian Oil Company (NIOC). The consortium aimed to develop Iran's offshore gas field and extract 20 billion cubic meters of natural gas per year by 2001. Russia's Gazprom and Malaysia's Petronas were also part of the consortium (Tarock, 1999, p. 48).

3. France's Approach to Iran's Nuclear Program

The revelation of Iran's secret nuclear program in 2002 weakened relations between Paris and Tehran. The coming to power of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in 2005 and Nicolas Sarkozy in 2007 ended a decade of good relations. Regarding nuclear negotiations, French diplomacy has been at the forefront since 2007. Contrary to the axis promoted by Jacques Chirac [1995-2007], in which Berlin and Moscow defended a middle position, Nicolas Sarkozy chose to deal with London and Tel Aviv and opted for aggressive diplomacy in favor of sanctions. This French stance on the nuclear issue still did not yield the expected results, given the limited influence of French diplomacy in Iran and Iran's resistance to international and European sanctions. Paris not only maintained its hawkish approach under François Hollande as president [2012-2017] and Laurent Fabius as foreign minister but also hardened it during the negotiations leading to the Iran nuclear deal in 2015. It claimed that the US negotiators were naïve and ready to make unnecessary concessions to Iran.

Since Emmanuel Macron became president in 2017, France has turned towards more pragmatic behavior and maintained its hawkish stance from time to time. In this context, Macron emphasized "multilateralism", "the search for regional balance", "diplomacy before war" and "the fight against terrorism" (Ankasam, 2017). In the face of US President Donald Trump's withdrawal from the JCPOA in May 2018, French officials have repeatedly stated that they want the deal to survive. In this respect, the Macron government welcomed the election of the new US President Joe Biden, who did not approve of former President Donald Trump's withdrawal from the Iran nuclear deal and declared his desire to return to

the agreement. France, like the rest of Europe, mostly welcomed Biden's declared intention to rebuild transatlantic relations and consult European allies on Iranian issues and other regional tensions.

French officials have stated their commitment to preserving the JCPOA, but some of their statements appear to be at odds with this goal. In an interview with the French Weekly Journal du Dimanche on January 16, 2021, Foreign Minister Le Drian suggested that Iran's ballistic weapons and proliferation policies, which have destabilized the region, should be addressed in the new negotiations (Clemenceau, 2021). While the substance of the message is not substantially different from that of the Biden administration, the tone is more confrontational and ultimatum-like than conciliatory. During a meeting hosted by the Atlantic Council on February 4, 2021, President Macron argued that the JCPOA should be more inclusive by including Saudi Arabia and Israel. He acknowledged that the deal cannot be successful without the support of regional governments, but did not provide a clear vision for how Saudi Arabia and Israel could be involved in the future of the JCPOA (Walla, 2021). As expected, Iranian Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Saeed Khatibzadeh swiftly rejected the idea of Saudi Arabia and Israel participating in the JCPOA negotiations, declaring it unacceptable.

During a meeting in Paris on June 25, 2021, French Foreign Minister Le Drian expressed his government's support for nuclear negotiations with Iran and called on the US to rejoin the nuclear deal. Le Drian acknowledged the contributions of the European Troika (UK-France-Germany) in keeping the nuclear deal alive. While NATO countries have shown solidarity after Russia attacked Ukraine in February 2022, France, which supported the nuclear deal and expressed concerns about the AUKUS agreement, appears to be cautious about the Biden administration's stance on Iran (Blinken, 2021; Nunez, 2021).

Although Iran offers many economic opportunities for France (Bourrat, 2020), the perceived threat posed by its nuclear program and the geopolitical struggle between the two countries in areas such as Lebanon, Iraq, and Syria show that the Neorealist theory of international relations is competent in explaining the ups and downs of Paris-Tehran relations. The French leadership sees Iran as the main culprit for the failure of efforts to revitalize the 2015 nuclear deal. It is also worth noting French criticism of

Tehran's role in supplying armed drones used by Russia in its war against Ukraine. Paris has described Iran's regional policies as 'destabilizing' in the most authoritative terms. This was evident in President Macron's speech in Jordan on the sidelines of the 'Baghdad 2' conference on December 20, 2022. Therefore, Iran's perceived threat of pushing uranium enrichment to the threshold for nuclear weaponization and the ongoing geopolitical struggle between the two countries in the Middle East continues to be decisive in Paris-Tehran relations. The following pages will analyze how France and Iran have developed policies to address these areas of struggle.

4. Areas of Rivalry between France and Iran: Lebanon, Iraq and Syria

France's Middle East policy is centered on several priorities, including ensuring the safe and free transit of oil, expanding export markets, and consolidating political influence. The Persian Gulf region is particularly important to France as it meets about 30% of the country's oil needs. France is keen on increasing its military presence in key strategic locations to assert its influence on the global stage. Currently, France has three main military presences in the Middle East, with around 2,000 troops: First, in the Iraq-Syria-Jordan region for Operation Chammal, in which the Aerospace Forces and Special Forces are mobilized against ISIS. The second is in the Persian Gulf with the FFEAU base (Forces Françaises aux Émirats Arabes Unis) in the United Arab Emirates. The third is in Lebanon, with Operation Daman, France's participation in the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon. This posture is also based on political relations in which the UAE, Jordan, Egypt, and Iraq are privileged partners, albeit each with their own sensitivities. However, recent geopolitical shifts that have brought new challenges to the region risk questioning the solidity of these partnerships and even France's entire strategy in the Middle East (Fayet, 2022, p. 45).

Within the Middle East region, the UAE stands as France's primary military partner, and the two countries maintain a deep and diverse level of cooperation. The FFEAU base, which houses around 650 French military personnel, includes an air base, a naval base, and the 5th Cuirassiers Regiment. In addition to lucrative arms sales and nuclear power plant

construction deals, France and the UAE have signed a defense treaty that obligates France to defend the UAE if it is attacked. The FFEAU base provides critical logistical and military support, such as keeping the Strait of Hormuz open in the event of a conflict in the region. Established in 2012, the base has since facilitated operational cooperation between France and the UAE, providing a strategic base for French military operations in the region, including the rapid deployment of forces during Operation Chammal against ISIS. Finally, the FFEAU base in Abu Dhabi plays an important role in the implementation of bilateral military cooperation between France and the UAE (Fayet, 2022, p. 9).

France's foreign policy in the Middle East also addresses regional issues such as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the Syrian civil war, and instability in Lebanon and Iraq. As a result, there are areas in the Middle East where France is trying to concentrate power and increase its influence, and where it is confronting Iran. France, which wants to increase its influence in Lebanon, Iraq, and Syria, is a rival for Iran, which sees these countries as a link in the "axis of resistance". Especially in the Syrian civil war, the two countries support opposing sides, while France strengthens its hand in these areas of competition by developing good relations with anti-Iranian countries such as Israel, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE. However, changes at the global and regional levels affect these rivalries and the policies pursued.

4.1. Lebanon: A Country at the Center of France-Iran Rivalry

Having lost its decisive position in Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia compared to the past, and having suffered a diplomatic and field realities setback in Libya, France has real-political concerns in Lebanon. Lebanon's coastline in the Eastern Mediterranean region, its maritime borders with Israel-Palestine, Syria and the island of Cyprus, and the recent interest of international companies, especially Russian-based natural gas companies, in Lebanon's possible natural gas reserves are among France's real-political concerns. Therefore, it should be emphasized that France attaches particular importance to Lebanon, which is strategically located in terms of possessing energy resources and transporting these resources to world markets, in its quest to compensate for the significant challenges it faces in North Africa and the Sahel region with the actors in the Levant region. In

addition to the energy issue, the potential refugee problem also comes to the fore in France's approach to the Mediterranean in general and Lebanon in particular. Considering that a significant number of Lebanese immigrants live in France today due to the Lebanese civil war of 1975-1989 and that these immigrants have formed a diaspora, a civil war in Lebanon may confront France with the same concern again. Therefore, it can be said that France, which has faced the problem of migration due to the instability in countries such as Libya, Tunisia and Syria, and as a result, is in a domestic political struggle with the rise of far-right movements, has a real political concern about eliminating the instability in Lebanon (Yetim, 2020; Sayle, 2017).

In the geopolitical line that Iran calls the "axis of resistance" and its opponents define as the "Shiite crescent", Lebanon serves as Iran's forward tip to the Mediterranean via Hezbollah. Hezbollah, which has an important political-military role in Lebanon, has created an impact beyond the borders of the country with the relations it has developed with Iran since its establishment in the 1980s, and has proven to be one of the loyal non-state actors used by Iran in Middle Eastern politics by taking part in the Syrian civil war. Based on the Lebanese example, Iran is trying to integrate the armed structures it has established in the region with a strategy that we can call the "Hezbollah Model" into the political-social life of those countries and to become more effective and permanent there through this ground. Hashd al-Shaabi (The Popular Mobilization Forces) in Iraq, Ansarullah in Yemen, and Shiite militias in Syria have been designed as the projections of the Hezbollah model mentioned above. These groups, established in crisis regions, have an important place in Iran's security strategy and serve as economic and strategic leverage for Iran.

In 2005, Hezbollah emerged on the political scene in Lebanon after Syria's withdrawal following the assassination of former Prime Minister Rafik Hariri. Despite being designated a terrorist organization by the US, it is seen by many Lebanese as the resistance force that liberated South Lebanon from Israeli occupation in 2000. In that year, it took its first seat in the national cabinet and integrated into the political administration. Following the 34-day war between Israel and Hezbollah in 2006, the group declared full control over Lebanon. The Qatari-brokered "Doha Agreement" of 2008 ended eighteen months of political stalemate and averted civil war, resulting

in increased power for Hezbollah and a shift in the balance of power in the country in its favor, including the ability to veto Cabinet decisions. In October 2016, Hezbollah achieved a significant victory by having former Army commander General Michel Aoun, a strong Christian ally, elected president. With broad popular support, representation in parliament and the Cabinet, and thus the power to influence political decision-making in Lebanon, Hezbollah undoubtedly reflects Iranian influence in the country (Saoud, 2021).

Compared to other parties in Lebanon, Hezbollah's influence is greater due to several factors, including strong external backing from Iran, greater capacity in terms of organization, financing, physical resources, and number of followers, its pursuit of a comprehensive and long-term strategy, weaknesses in the Lebanese state that Hezbollah has been able to exploit more systematically than other political parties, and a political system based on elite pacts. Although Hezbollah contributes to the weakness of the Lebanese state, it is also a product of the weak political system in Lebanon. During the current economic and political crisis in Lebanon, Hezbollah continues to be seen as an alternative to other parties, as they have failed to offer any solutions to the Lebanese people. While the Lebanese state cannot provide basic services, Hezbollah is at least providing solutions for its constituency, from medical services to access to markets at affordable prices. With a growing Shia Arab population, which is expanding at higher rates than other ethnic groups, and an increasingly alienated constituency from the Lebanese central government and political elites, Hezbollah's popularity remains strong (Sofuoğlu, 2021).

After a 13-month-long period, a new government was formed in Lebanon to replace the administration led by Hassan Diab, who resigned following the explosion at the Port of Beirut on August 4, 2020. The process ended with the announcement of Najib Mikati's cabinet on September 10, 2021. After the efforts of Lebanon's Ambassador to Berlin, Dr. Mustapha Adib, and former Prime Minister Saad al-Hariri failed, Najib Mikati took over the task of forming the government and reached an agreement with President Michel Aoun for a cabinet representing both Muslim and Christian parties. The cabinet consists of 24 ministers. France's compromise with Iran during the government formation process in Lebanon was driven by real political concerns. It is understood that negotiations took place between

France and Iran, leading to bargains and transformations in bilateral relations. The Lebanese government had resigned following the Port of Beirut explosion on August 4, 2020. French President Macron visited Lebanon twice, on August 6 and September 1, 2020, in an attempt to form a government. However, due to internal disagreements, France's initiative was unsuccessful. Macron ended his second visit to Lebanon with a warning: "If the authorities do not make progress by the end of October, we will bear the consequences and penalties. If the Lebanese authorities do nothing, the international community's financial aid will be blocked." On July 26, 2021, Najib Mikati assumed the task of forming the government in Lebanon, and 13 months later, on September 10, 2021, he reached an agreement with President Michel Aoun on his new cabinet of 24 ministers.

It can be argued that France and Iran developed closer ties during the government formation process in Lebanon. Despite discomfort from the Washington administration, they turned a blind eye to France's actions out of fear that Lebanon would completely collapse (Şakir, 2021). Macron expressed his desire to enhance bilateral relations with Tehran and open a new chapter in their regional cooperation. Referring to the situation in Lebanon, Macron emphasized the importance of France and Iran's cooperation with Hezbollah for the formation of a strong and efficient government in the country. In response, Raisi welcomed the strengthening of relations between Tehran and Paris, especially in economic and commercial fields, and stated that they are ready to start their comprehensive relations with Europe from France. Although France did not explicitly deny Tehran's statement on Hezbollah, it tacitly approved its content, and relations between the two countries have been improving since Raisi took office in June 2021. The consensus on the formation of a new government in Lebanon was reached with the approval of Iran's allies in the country, namely Hezbollah (Topçu, 2021).

To emphasize the change under Ebrahim Raisi's government, it should be recalled that former Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif had previously criticized France's approach to Lebanon, especially after the Beirut bombing, describing it as an attempt by France to dictate its demands to Lebanese politics. However, Raisi has supported the efforts of Iran, France and Hezbollah to form a strong government in Lebanon. Iran's approach to France has changed. In November 2019, senior Iranian political officials

characterized Macron's mediation efforts between Tehran and Washington as either naive or a French partnership with the United States (Aftabnews, 2021). However, with the inauguration of the Biden administration in 2021, Tehran's belief that its relations with the US would soften has brought it closer to the EU countries. Tehran has not forgotten that France is a member of the UN Security Council and a great power that knows the peculiarities of the region and defended the Iran nuclear deal. However, Iran has not given up all pressure to strengthen its hand at the nuclear negotiating table.

To leverage the ongoing crisis in Lebanon during the Vienna negotiations, Iran engaged in bargaining with France, in addition to the alleged obstruction of government formation in Lebanon. On September 6, 2021, Total, the French oil company, announced a major 25-year energy deal with the Iraqi government, which exerted pressure on the Paris administration to concede to Iranian interests in Lebanon to safeguard its own interests in Iraq. This deal paved the way for the formation of the Lebanese government and prompted Macron to exert pressure on Lebanese political forces. The deal entails the construction of four energy projects in southern Iraq, bordering Iran, with a total worth of \$27 billion. Notably, these are the most lucrative and ambitious deals an oil giant has signed in Iraq in recent years, particularly since several international companies are withdrawing from the Iraqi oil sector. For instance, Exxon announced in 2021 that it would sell its stake in the West Qurna oil field. Although the deals with Total bear resemblance to multiple projects that have been negotiated with the US-based ExxonMobil for years, the difficult negotiations with the latter failed to reach a conclusion (Saadi, 2021).

To conclude, President Macron's actions since his initial visit to Beirut on August 4, 2020, two days after the devastating explosion at the Beirut Port, demonstrate his desire to establish a relationship with Iran. This was evidenced by his efforts to rally political support in Lebanon and his invitation to the Hezbollah delegation during a meeting at the French Embassy to announce his initiative. Iran has reciprocated positively to these overtures (Khoury, 2021). Despite concerns about Iran's growing regional influence, France has refrained from taking an adversarial stance towards the country. Instead, France's primary approach has been to utilize economic relations as a tool to prevent Iran from becoming overly aggressive, while avoiding a confrontational posture (Financial Tribune,

2017). While it can be argued that France has an economic interest in this relationship, benefiting its companies, this is not the sole driving motivation. Iran serves as a significant hub country, connecting key geopolitical areas such as Central Asia, South Asia, the Middle East, and Turkey. This has contributed to France's need to cultivate a robust relationship with Iran. Additionally, Lebanon is a critical arena in which the rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia is playing out, making it an open area for cooperation in the Franco-Iranian rivalry.

4.2. Iraq: New Area of Iran-France Rivalry

French President Emmanuel Macron has strengthened relations with Iraq, especially under the former Iraqi Prime Minister Mustafa Kadhimi, and has kept Iraq as one of the leading countries in France's Middle East policy. Macron visited Iraq twice in one year between 2020 and 2021. The first visit was on September 3, 2020, when he announced his intention to support Iraq's sovereignty. His second visit was on August 27, 2021, to attend the Baghdad Conference on Cooperation and Partnership. Here he renewed his commitment to strategic partnership. The visit coincided with the signing of a major contract worth tens of billions of dollars to invest in Basra's gas fields. The French government was also planning to provide financing and contracts to French companies for the Baghdad Metro project and other reconstruction projects in Iraqi cities liberated from ISIS. It is clear that Macron is willing to shake up France's recent foreign policy approach, starting with Iraq, thus echoing Charles de Gaulle's idea that France should not simply follow US foreign policy. France is seeking to increase its economic influence in the Middle East and sees Iraq as a key partner in this endeavor. In addition, Iraq is a strategic partner for France in terms of security and counterterrorism efforts, especially given the threat posed by ISIS. Another potential factor is Macron's desire to differentiate French foreign policy from that of the United States. Macron has expressed a desire for France to play a more independent role on the world stage. Macron's visits to Iraq are part of this effort to build relationships and alliances outside the traditional Western powers (Dagher, 2021).

France diverged from the Middle East policies of the US and the UK due to its opposition to the US invasion of Iraq in 2003 (Harvey, 2021). French

President Emmanuel Macron has taken significant steps to strengthen his country's global reputation, particularly by following Charles de Gaulle's philosophy of protecting French autonomy against the US (France 24, 2021). Macron's visits to Baghdad in September 2020, when the US decided to reduce the number of troops in Iraq, and his recent visits to Baghdad and Erbil after the US announced that it would withdraw its combat troops by the end of 2021, demonstrate France's readiness to increase its influence in Iraq after the US withdrawal (Aydoğan & Alaca, 2021). Despite having only 800 troops stationed in Iraq, France's deployment is mainly for counterterrorism purposes, especially given the potential resurgence of ISIS. However, these public relations initiatives in Baghdad are also part of Macron's practice of playing the hero in such crises. For instance, when he visited Lebanon, a former French colony, after the devastating explosion in the port of Beirut in August 2020, critics accused him of acting as a "white savior". It appears that France's next target is Iraq (Harvey, 2021). France's interest in influencing the future of Iraq has political and economic benefits.

Considering that on August 28, 2021, only French President Emmanuel Macron from outside the region attended the conference held in Baghdad, where the participants supported the efforts of the Baghdad government in the reconstruction of Iraq and discussed agendas such as the need for joint action in the fight against terrorism and the unification of regional and national efforts to ensure regional stability, it can be said that France also aims to benefit from the economic market emerging in the context of regional normalization and to put its political weight. Especially considering its historical hegemony in the region, France aspires to be one of the influential powers at the table in the vacuum that will be created after the US withdrawal (Euronews, 2021). France's recent intensive diplomatic traffic centered on Iraq coincided with the escalation of France-Turkey tensions, the intensification of Turkey's operations against the terrorist organization PKK in northern Iraq, the efforts of the then prime minister of Iraq to attract Kurds to his side in order to break Iranian influence in the country, and the search for a solution to the disputes between Baghdad and Arbil. Macron's second visit to Iraq and his meetings in Baghdad with Iraqi President Barham Salih, Prime Minister Mustafa Kadhimi and President of the Iraqi Kurdish Regional Government Nechirvan Barzani carried many messages not only for Baghdad-Erbil relations but also for Iran, Syria and Turkey (Aydoğan & Alaca, 2021).

Iraq offers promising economic opportunities, especially for France. Examples such as the nuclear power plant project, the Baghdad metro project and the reconstruction of Mosul airport are indicative of this (Aydoğan & Alaca, 2021). During Macron's visit, Total, a French company with a long history in Iraq, signed a contract worth 27 billion dollars to extract oil and gas from a series of wells in Basra. This contract was the result of negotiations between France and Iran on the Lebanese issue, as mentioned in the section on Lebanon. According to Iraqi Oil Minister Ihsan Abdul-Jabbar Ismail, the gas to be developed by Total will initially replace crude oil and heavy fuel oil burned in power plants to generate electricity, which will help reduce the government's loss of revenue by \$5 billion (Dourian, 2021). Although the project aims to replace liquids and not imported gas, its ultimate goal is to stop imports. In addition to the Total deal, France has another contract to build the Metro in Baghdad, and hopes to sign contracts for the reconstruction of Sunni areas destroyed in the war against ISIS. There is also significant potential for France to sell aircraft and military equipment to Iraq (Dagher, 2021).

On January 27, 2023, French President Emmanuel Macron received the new Iraqi Prime Minister Mohammed al-Sudani in Paris. During the meeting, which was also attended by Sébastien Lecornu, the French Armed Forces Minister, the two leaders discussed energy, economic, security, and cultural issues. They signed a strategic partnership agreement between France and Iraq, aimed at realizing common interests on the basis of equality of sovereignty and rights, in accordance with the principle of non-interference in mutual internal affairs. Iraqi Foreign Minister Fuad Hussein said the signed agreements cover a number of areas, including energy, oil, and electricity, and several ongoing French-assisted projects in Iraq, such as the metro project in Baghdad, was discussed. The two sides also discussed Iraq's security and French military assistance, economic relations in general, and the political situation in the region. Iraqi Ambassador to France Wadi Bati called the visit a historic day in Baghdad-Paris relations, and Sudani expressed his desire for France to participate in the reconstruction and strengthening of Iraq's economic infrastructure, particularly in the areas of energy, oil, and electricity (Rudaw, 2023).

Macron strengthened relations with Iraq, particularly under the former Iraqi Prime Minister Mustafa Kadhim, and kept Iraq as one of the leading

countries in France's Middle East policy. The extent to which this situation will continue with the Sudani government has been one of the important points of discussion when interpreting Sudani's possible foreign policy steps. However, Sudani's visit and the importance attributed to bilateral relations with the agreements signed during the visit signal that France-Iraq relations, which gained strength under Kadhimî, will continue with the new government. It can be said that France, which wants to gain influence in Iraq as an alternative to the presence of the US and Iran in the region, also wants to open a new field of competition with Turkey. In this context, it can also be said that Sudani sees relations with France as an opportunity that can provide diversity in foreign policy, in terms of different investments from Iranian and US actors and military aid in possible cases (Çalışkan, 2023).

The agreement between France and Iraq is important because it is the most comprehensive agreement signed between the two countries to date. The 50-article agreement also emphasizes military cooperation. The agreement includes issues such as the fight against terrorism by increasing the defense and security capabilities of the two countries in cooperation and arming the Iraqi Army with French-made military equipment. Beyond the agreement, it is known that France has been trying to increase its cooperation with Iraqi military institutions in the last few years. In the aftermath of the assassination of Qasem Soleimani, Macron took a stance for French troops to remain in Iraq in order to ensure that foreign forces, especially US troops, leave Iraq. In this context, Macron confirmed that studies are being carried out to assess France's capacity to stay in Iraq on its own without the support of the US, and said, "We have the operational capacity to ensure that we can stay in Iraq." In May 2022, Iraq, the United States, and France signed a military agreement to provide Iraq with heavy weapons reinforced with advanced weaponry. In line with Macron's enthusiasm for a military presence in Iraq, in June 2022, officials from the Iraqi Counter-Terrorism Unit and the French Special Operations Command met in Baghdad and held a series of talks on military cooperation. Finally, with the strategic cooperation agreement signed at the level of the two leaders, Macron was able to achieve concrete outcomes in the field of military cooperation. From this perspective, it can be said that France is trying to fill the gaps left by the US, which withdrew a significant part of its troops from Iraq by handing over the military bases in Iraq to the Iraqi Army in 2020. While the military

presence in question is not expected to become as multidimensional as the US, especially in the short term, it can be said that France will try to take a position in Iraq in areas of interest that it can benefit from and will confront its possible rivals, including Iran and Turkey, in terms of both economic and military cooperation (Çalışkan, 2023).

Iran seems to be uneasy about France's efforts to gain influence in Iraq. Geopolitically, Iraq is a crucial component of Iran's regional strategy. As Iran's western neighbor and Syria's eastern neighbor, Iraq provides a land link to Syria and its Lebanese allies, which enables Iranian-backed militias to move freely between the three countries to counter perceived challenges to the Iranian-led "axis of resistance" in the region, especially since the Syrian war began in 2011 and ISIS expanded in 2014. At the same time, due to Iraq's geopolitical importance, Iran is highly sensitive to the presence and activities of rival powers in Iraq. Tehran sees Iraq as a potential market for exporting Iranian goods, electricity, and gas. Furthermore, Iran uses Iraq's geographic position to establish transit links with Syria, the Mediterranean, and eventually Europe (Azizi, 2021). Iran is the most powerful regional actor in Iraq since the overthrow of Saddam Hussein in 2003.

4.3. Syria: Iran-France Rivalry Expands

During the Arab Spring, France's response to the outbreak of violence in Syria was initially characterized by a reserved approach, marked by subdued criticism and weak condemnations. While France played a leading role in the intervention in Libya, it adopted a more restrained stance in the Syrian conflict. Although diplomatic measures were taken against the Assad regime, military intervention was not preferred. France supported the secular wing of the opposition in the country and was apprehensive about the ascendancy of Islamic groups to power. France's approach to the Syrian crisis can be observed in three different phases. Initially, at the onset of the crisis, France attempted to maintain a relatively neutral stance and provided only rhetorical support to the opposition. In the second phase, France became a direct party to the crisis by imposing various diplomatic and economic sanctions against the regime and de facto support to the opposition, in conjunction with its European allies. In the third phase, France

shifted its focus to combating ISIS as the group's terrorism increasingly threatened Europe, and especially France, more closely (Dağdelen & Yılmaz, 2020, p. 7). After the 2015 ISIS attacks in Paris, France's counter-ISIS strategy took on a different dimension. Having experienced terrorism so closely within its own territory, France, unlike the US and the UK, has demonstrated a desire to take a more prominent role in Syria.

France has become a target for the ISIS terrorist organization due to its effective fight in Syria under the umbrella of the coalition. Starting on January 7, 2015 with the Charlie Hebdo and Ile-de-France attacks, the threat peaked on November 13, 2015 with armed and bomb attacks in seven different locations in Paris. Following these attacks, a state of emergency was declared and all borders of the country were closed. These attacks, the bloodiest incident France has experienced since the Second World War, marked a turning point for France's Syria policy and security. No longer was the civil war between the Bashar al-Assad regime and the opposition the primary concern for France, but the elimination of the ISIS threat became the primary objective. The last time the borders were completely closed was after the state of emergency declared during the Algerian War of Independence (Dağdelen & Yılmaz, 2020, p. 17). In the fight against ISIS, after the Paris attacks, France started to support the PYD/PKK terrorist organization together with the US, instead of acting with its NATO ally Turkey and the Syrian opposition, which it actively supported. Therefore, the Paris attacks are considered as a critical turning point for France's Syria policy and security. It was in this context that France made its first troop deployment to Syria in June 2016 after the ISIS attacks in Paris. With Macron becoming President in 2017, France's Syria policy underwent a significant change, and in this context, its Syria strategy, which for a long time considered the removal of Assad from power as its top priority, completely changed (Ankasam, 2018).

France has been planning to increase its role in Syria, which is seen not only as an attempt to increase its sphere of influence but also as a desire to counter Turkey (Sobutin, 2021). According to some reports, French envoys visited northeastern Syria twice in April 2021. As is well known, France has been interested in northeast Syria since 2015. While France was the main supporter of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) project, the Americans managed to keep France out of the equation thanks to

their military coordination with the SDF. This coordination resulted in an alliance when Washington decided that the SDF would be its executive arm in the fight against ISIS. However, France did not distance itself from the SDF (Hardan, 2021).

France seeks to benefit from the military repositioning of US forces in the Middle East, specifically in Iraq and Syria. Like Russia, Iran, and Turkey, France wants to be a key player in Syria. However, while the Macron government appears to be pursuing an assertive policy in Syria, French troops are currently only operating under the protection of the US military. France desires to establish a permanent presence in the region and compensate for its diminishing role in Lebanon due to Iranian influence. This is why it is inviting groups from Northeast Syria to Paris. Besides, the Eastern Euphrates region is an area rich in natural resources and potential for development, which has contributed to France's interest in the region. Prior to the civil war in Syria, France had commercial ventures in the oil-rich areas. However, due to its opposition to the Syrian regime and Russia, it cannot operate in Damascus or other regime-controlled areas. Additionally, tensions with Turkey prevent France from establishing a presence in northwestern Syria (Hardan, 2021; Aras, 2017). France's actions in Syria are often interpreted as an attempt to assert its historical right to a sphere of influence in the Middle East. By expanding its cooperation with the PYD/PKK in Syria, France has directly opposed Turkey's national security interests. Iran views the regional tensions between France and Turkey as a positive development for its own interests.

In the early months of the Syrian civil war, as regime forces rapidly retreated against the opposition, Iran called upon Lebanese Hezbollah to support the regime. Additionally, they included groups such as the Fatimiyyoun and Zaynabiyyoun Brigades, mobilizing around 150-200 thousand Shiite militia to fight on behalf of Assad's forces. This marked a significant shift in the course of the war, with Iran's support enabling the regime to regain control of some of the lost territories. Iran also brokered a deal between the Assad administration and the PYD, the Syrian branch of the PKK, with the support of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) in Northern Iraq, which it has good relations with. The agreement was made in exchange for the PYD's decision not to align with the Syrian opposition and to suppress Kurdish anti-regime organizations. As a result, the Assad

regime handed over control of its military troops in some Kurdish-majority communities in northern Syria to the PYD, as part of its strategy to combat the opposition and prevent Turkey from increasing its influence in the region. As a result, the PYD/PKK used the Kurdish opposition in Syria to fight against Turkey instead of leading it against the Assad regime, which it called “our executioner.” This region started the process of statehood for the PKK, creating self-proclaimed “autonomous” cantons (Sari, 2022).

As a result, the relationship between Iran and the PYD started as a tactical cooperation against the opposition in Syria and Turkey, but it evolved into a complicated and conflicted relationship. At times, Iran has even organized attacks with Shiite militias on the ground to neutralize PYD members. This relationship is also a projection of a local rivalry. The on-going fierce rivalry between the PYD and the ENKS in Rojava reflects and intensifies the local conflict between the PKK and Barzani. As this rivalry between the Syrian Kurds moves to the local level, regional powers are also compelled to choose sides. Therefore, Iran, along with the PUK and Gorran, the parties aligned with it in the Iraqi Kurdish Regional Government, has aligned itself more closely with the PKK/PYD line, while Turkey has sided with the KDP and the ENKS. Consequently, a separate ‘proxy war’ has emerged in northern Syria that is linked to the Syrian civil war, but also independent of it (Sari, 2022).

On the one hand, Iran desires the US to end its presence in Syria by severing its relations with the PYD/PKK. On the other hand, it is apprehensive about the Turkish-Russian influence in the region in the event of the US withdrawal. In response to the Turkish-Russian influence in Syria, Tehran is pushing for the Assad regime to dominate the entire country and is opposed to the PYD’s aspirations for autonomy. Ultimately, it appears that the Tehran administration has no choice but to tacitly approve the US project that seeks to legitimize the PYD in the coming period, as it opposes Turkey’s influence in the safe zone in northern Syria (Ankasam, 2019). While France pursues an ambitious and aggressive anti-Turkey policy by mobilizing every opposition political actor against Ankara, its policy towards the PYD-YPG aligns with Iran’s in the short term. However, in the long term, France aims to diminish Iranian and Russian influence in Syria, restrict Hezbollah’s activities, and establish a Kurdish autonomous region. In this context, it can be said that France’s quest for increased influence in Syria will disturb Iran.

5. Conclusion

France, which has been pursuing independent policies from the US since Charles de Gaulle, has recently been concentrating its power in the Eastern Mediterranean and the Middle East. Under the leadership of Emmanuel Macron, France's "Pax Mediterranea" discourse aims to revive its influence in countries where it established colonial regimes in the past, such as Syria and especially Lebanon. France is intensifying its political-military initiatives in the Mediterranean region. France has real-political concerns in Lebanon, as it is no longer decisive in Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia and has suffered a diplomatic setback in Libya. Lebanon's coastline, maritime borders, and possible natural gas reserves are of particular importance to France, as they are strategically significant in terms of international companies' interests and energy resource possession. In addition, France is concerned about the refugee problem in the event of a possible civil war in Lebanon. Lebanon serves as Iran's front end to the Mediterranean through Hezbollah, which is one of the non-state actors used by Iran in Middle East politics. Hezbollah took part in the Syrian civil war and played an important role for Iran.

In Iraq, another area of competition between France and Iran, the Paris administration seems to be increasing its influence in this country with firm steps. Iraqi Prime Minister Mohammed al-Sudani met with French President Emmanuel Macron on January 27, 2023, and discussed energy, economy, security, and culture. French Minister of Armed Forces Sébastien Lecornu also attended the meeting. Following the meeting, the two leaders signed a strategic partnership agreement aimed at realizing common interests on the basis of equality of sovereignty and rights, in accordance with the principle of mutual non-interference in internal affairs. The agreement includes cooperation in energy, oil, electricity, and many other fields. There were also a number of projects in which the French are helping Iraq, such as the metro project in Baghdad. The importance of the agreement is also emphasized by the fact that it is the most comprehensive agreement between the two countries and consists of 50 articles. Military cooperation is also included in the agreement. Macron aims to increase cooperation with Iraqi military institutions, and this agreement shows that relations between France and Iraq have entered a new phase.

In Syria, it is not possible to talk about intense rivalry between France and Iran. The situation here is somewhat similar to Yemen. France is trying to establish a presence there, trying to gain influence in some oil regions, but it is not a very effective actor. In Syria, it can be said that France mostly confronts Turkey. However, in the long run, France is likely to confront Iran here as well. France, like Russia, Iran, and Turkey, wants to be a key player in Syria. In this sense, its activities in Lebanon, Iraq, and Syria, which are considered Iran's spheres of influence, are carefully monitored by Iran. Iran is also uncomfortable with some of France's activities, as analyzed throughout the article. However, it is seen that these two countries occasionally cooperate in these areas against different actors. Although Iran offers many economic opportunities for France, the perceived threat posed by its nuclear program and the geopolitical struggle between the two countries in areas such as Lebanon, Iraq, and Syria have led to a volatile relationship between Paris and Tehran. Paris has described Iran's regional policies as 'destabilizing' in the most authoritative terms. Iran's perceived threat by pushing uranium enrichment to the threshold for nuclear weaponization and the ongoing geopolitical struggle between the two countries in the Middle East continues to be decisive in Paris-Tehran relations.

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