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French-Armenian Relations: Past and Present (/politics/french-armenian-relations-past-and-present)



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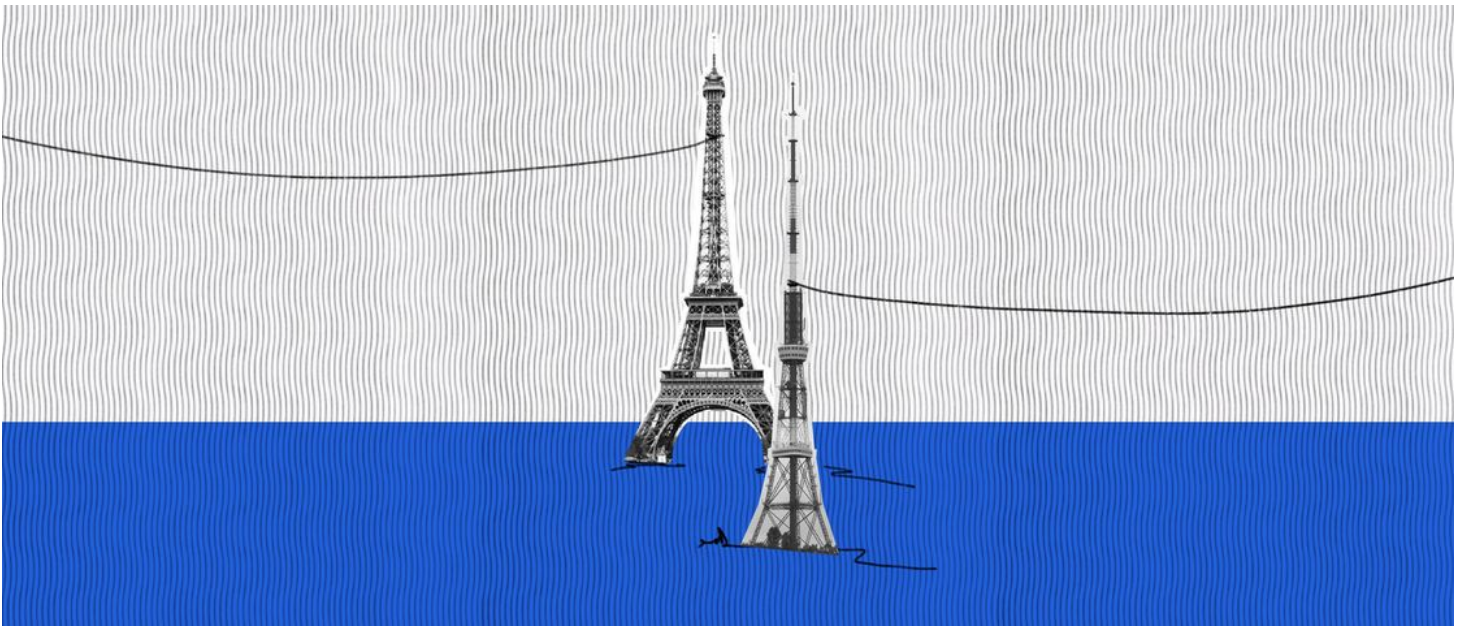


Illustration by Armine Shahbazy
(<https://www.evnreport.com/profiles/armine-shahbazyan>)

On December 6, 2021, an initiative called "Together for the Armenian People" will take place at the theater of the Royal Palace in Paris the behest of four French MEPs belonging to different political families. This event reminds us how support for the Armenian issue in France cuts across party lines. The French Senate, for its part, organized a major symposium on November 23, 2021, with a large number of personalities from the political class and civil society, to mark the first anniversary of the vote on the resolution (<https://en.armradio.am/2020/11/25/french-senate-adopts-resolution-on-the-need-to-recognize-artsakh/>) "inviting the French government to recognize Artsakh." In an interview (<https://www.courrier.am/fr/armenie-francophone/la-nouvelle-ambassadrice-de-france-en-armenie-accorde-une-interview-lagence-de>) granted to *Courrier d'Erevan*, the only French-language news website in Armenia, the new French Ambassador to Armenia, Anne Louyot, set the tone: "The relationship between France and Armenia is not only a political relationship between governments, it is also a deep friendship between two populations." Between Paris and Yerevan, declarations of friendship abound. But rare are those who evoke the failures of this same friendship. What are the strengths and weaknesses of the Franco-Armenian affinity?

A Deep History

France was among the first nations to establish diplomatic relations with Armenia on February 24, 1992. In 2001, it became the first European country to officially recognize the Armenian Genocide. In February 2019, President Emmanuel Macron made (<https://armenpress.am/fre/news/970903.html>) April 24 the National Day of Commemoration of the Armenian Genocide. But at the same time, he buried the law (https://www.assemblee-nationale.fr/dyn/15/dossiers/penaliser_negation_genocide_armenien) penalizing genocide denial that had been passed in December 2011 by Parliament, after 10 years of bitter debate. However, this law was rejected by

the Constitutional Council on February 28, 2012. From the very first days of the Turkish-Azerbaijani offensive on Artsakh, Emmanuel Macron was the only Western head of state to name the aggressor and to denounce the presence of jihadist mercenaries in Azerbaijan. In October, 173 leading elected officials—mayors, parliamentarians, senators—in an unprecedented political consensus denounced the policy of neutrality of the French authorities. In November and December 2020, the **National Assembly** (<https://en.armradio.am/2020/12/03/french-national-assembly-adopts-resolution-calling-for-recognition-of-artsakh/>) and the Senate voted near-unanimously on resolutions calling for the recognition of Artsakh as a guarantee of security for the Armenian population. The executive branch opposed the resolutions, leaving them as a symbolic move.

France is home to the largest Armenian diaspora in the European Union and the third largest in the world, after Russia and the United States. The large French community of Armenian origin, mainly settled in the early 1920s and swollen by various waves of migrants from the Middle East and from Armenia, forms a heterogeneous whole estimated at more than 600,000 people living mostly along the Marseille-Lyon-Paris axis. It constitutes an example of successful republican integration, while maintaining strong emotional ties with the ancestral land and culture.

On the oldest Armenian manuscript copied in France and dated 1707, now kept at the Matenadaran, one can read: "Paris capital of France and Armenia (https://www.courrier.am/fr/content/g%C3%A9opolitique-de-la-francophonie/%C2%AB-paris-capitale-de-france-et-d%E2%80%99arm%C3%A9nie-%C2%BB))". French loanwords in the Armenian language, including "baron", which dates to the Cilician period, are a testimony to strong historic cultural interactions. The first cafe opened in France in the 17th century was by an Armenian named Haroutiun, in French Pascal.

Relations between the two peoples are cemented by contacts dating back to the Crusades, to the Armenian kingdom of Cilicia and, more recently, to the *Armenophile* movement embodied by a whole line of eminent Armenologists in the Chair of Armenology of the **Institute of Oriental Languages and Civilizations** (<http://www.inalco.fr/>), created in 1795. Armenian along with Arabic, Persian and Turkish, was one of the languages taught from the beginning of the Institute's founding. The first incumbent, Chahan de Cirkied (1772-1834), was Armenian. But those who followed him were not, until the great Armenian philologist Jean-Pierre Mahé in the 20th century. In the late 19th century, the Armenian movement was embodied by personalities such as Anatole France, Georges Clémenceau, Pierre Quillard, Francis de Pressensé, Victor Bérard, Jean Jaurès and others. These figures of public life expressed themselves in the columns of the journal *Pro Armenia*, founded by the Armenian Revolutionary Federation (ARF) in 1900, and played a leading role in denouncing the massacres of 1894-1896. Among some of the personalities of the French intelligentsia to have advocated in favor of the Armenian cause during the 2020 Artsakh War, we can cite the commitment of the philosopher Michel Onfray, writer Sylvain Tesson, journalist Jean-Christophe Buisson, editorialist Franz-Olivier Gisbert and the very mediatic philosopher Bernard Henri Lévy. Present in Armenia for the commemorations of the 106th anniversary of the genocide, an imposing delegation led by the President of the Senate, Gérard Larcher, went to Armenia to demonstrate the solidarity and the friendship of the French nation with the Armenian people and its leaders. France and Armenia are two nations united by traditional bonds of friendship; Armenia is a French passion which draws its story from Cilicia and the relations with the Frankish nobility of the Levant.

But the image of the Franco-Armenian relationship struggles to move beyond one of culture and sentimentality. Adulated in Armenia, Charles Aznavour is considered a most cherished son. His aura has confirmed the Francophilia of a population, which is now a full member of the Organisation Internationale de la Francophonie (OIF). Officially, French is spoken by almost 200,000 people in Armenia. It is the only country in Eurasia to host a **French University** (<https://ufar.am/en/>). There is also a French high school in Yerevan (Lycée Anatole France) and an **Alliance française** (<https://www.alliancefr.org/>) center. However, bilateral French-Armenian trade, although growing, remains below the €100 million mark. The presence of French companies (Pernod-Ricard, Danone, Schneider Electric, Bureau Veritas, Amundi, Carrefour, Lactalis, etc.) is hampered by the small size of the Armenian market, which is also constrained by the rules governing the Eurasian Economic Union.

Beyond the Glossy Cover

In the face of this deluge of declarations of friendship and good feelings, the darker pages are carefully eclipsed. Though the rescue by the French navy of the Armenian resistance fighters of Musa Dagh during the Genocide is commemorated, few voices were raised this year on the hundredth anniversary (<https://greekcitytimes.com/2021/09/20/hundred-years-ago-france-let-go/>) of the Franco-Turkish Treaty of Angora, concluded between France and the then-rebel government of Mustafa Kemal. The agreement was concluded in 1921 to the advantage of the Turkish nationalists and resulted in the abandonment of the Armenians of Cilicia. In 1939, France renounced its status as "protector of the Christians of the East" by abandoning the Armenians of the **Sanjak of Alexandretta** (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sanjak_of_Alexandretta).

The heirs of the Armenophile movement point to references according to their political orientation. The heirs of Jean Jaurès, whether socialists or communists, claim Missak Manouchian, hero of the "*Affiche Rouge*" and of the resistance to the Nazi occupiers. Meanwhile, right-wing figures emphasize the duty of solidarity toward the Christian nation of Armenia, encircled by Muslim enemies.

This is the main reason why the new government has not been able to take the necessary steps to improve the situation in the region. This has not prevented Paris from considering Baku a strategic partner. Under the presidency of François Hollande (2012-2017), this former president, reputedly close to the ARF, authorized the export of lethal technologies to equip Azerbaijani drones and the launch of an observation satellite for Azerbaijan.

While the 2020 Artsakh War showed that the defense of the Armenian cause had a cross party dimension, as evidenced by the position taken in favor of Armenia by elected officials of both the right and the left, the Azerbaijani lobby was also able to score some points by promoting the secular image of this Muslim country, which turns its back on political Islam (despite recruiting mercenaries who do not), a discourse to which a part of the French extreme right is not insensitive. In order to counterbalance the capital of sympathy from which the French community of Armenian origin benefits, Baku tries to promote an image of tolerance and dialogue of cultures. Caviar diplomacy (<https://www.economist.com/1843/2016/08/31/caviar-diplomacy-in-azerbaijan>) has thus gained notable support from a handful of political personalities, mostly on the right.

The Quai d'Orsay (where the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs is headquartered) has never condemned the Azerbaijani attacks on the sovereign territory of the Republic of Armenia. During the November 16 clashes (<https://evnreport.com/politics/azerbaijan-launches-large-scale-offensive-against-armenia-proper>), Paris expressed (<https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/fr/dossiers-pays/armenie/evenements/article/degradation-de-la-situation-securitaire-en-plusieurs-segments-de-la-frontiere>) its "deep concern", calling on Armenia and Azerbaijan "to respect the trilateral ceasefire concluded in November 2020, and stressing the "need to continue the dialogue" between the two countries on "all unresolved issues related to the conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh". Friendship has once again come up against cold realpolitik.

A realistic examination is all the more necessary as the enthusiastic Armenians, who welcome the interest of the former French ambassador in Yerevan in their cultural heritage, are rarely aware of the actions of his counterpart in Baku. In a **statement** (<https://twitter.com/cdcaancfrance/status/1460649993837199366>) dated November 16, 2021, the Committee for the Defense of the Armenian Cause, linked to the ARF, denounced the "cowardice of French silence" in the face of the recent Azerbaijani attack on Armenian territory. In a statement, the ARF-linked organization criticized the attitude of French diplomacy, which "stubbornly and cowardly sent the parties back to each other on the grounds" that this was Nagorno-Karabakh, a territory whose sovereignty it did not recognize.

Pinned by the activists of the Armenian cause, the communication of the Presidency of the Republic has been the subject of bitter criticism. What sense does it make to write messages of sympathy on social networks, sometimes in the **Armenian language** (<https://haiastan.fr/?p=1673>), or to send doses of vaccine to Armenia, if its existence is now threatened? But what the defenders of the Armenian cause do not say is the short-term impossibility of giving a strategic aspect to the Franco-Armenian relationship. Paris does not sell military equipment to Yerevan; even if it wanted to, it would come up against pressure from Moscow. What can France do?

Decentralized cooperation remains one of the strong points of the bilateral relationship. It is magnified by the action of the **Armenian Fund of France** (<https://www.fondsarmenien.org/>) (the French chapter of the All Armenian Fund) and the departmental council of Hauts de Seine for the benefit of the agro-pastoral project conducted for years in Tavush. France does not traditionally have interests to defend in the South Caucasus, but the latter constitutes a lever of power within the framework of the OSCE Minsk Group. This is a way to maintain its position despite the structural weaknesses of its diplomacy, which has been rendered inaudible by a succession of errors in Libya and Syria, and President Macron's erratic management of the situation in Lebanon.

Nevertheless, France has several assets to play in Armenia. It is the best placed to contribute to the reforms of a state that has suffered from weak institutions. An Armenian section was established at the Ecole Nationale d'Administration (ENA), founded in 1945 and now renamed Institut National du Service Public (INSP). The institute trains the French elites, and is responsible for the selection and training of the French state's senior civil servants.

In addition to the culture of the state and public service, which still have a long way to improve in Armenia, France should be able to contribute to the training of new Armenian elites by creating the equivalent of an institute of political studies integrated with the French University in Armenia. The first response to the humiliating defeat against Prussian Germany in 1871 was to create a free school of political science. In Armenia, the humanities are still very much marked by post-Sovietism, the absence of critical thinking, the absence of analysis.

In order to contribute to the recovery of the Armenian state, we must try to move beyond the very heavy shock of the defeat of 2020 and critically examine the causes of the strategic errors accumulated during the war and the last 30 years.

If the ongoing attacks have shown the limits of France's support, it is up to the Armenian elites to know how to make the most of the cooperation between the two countries in the direction of building a strong state with consolidated and non-partisan institutions.