



**Congressional  
Research Service**

Informing the legislative debate since 1914

---

# France and U.S.-French Relations: In Brief

**Paul Belkin**

Analyst in European Affairs

April 19, 2018

**Congressional Research Service**

7-5700

[www.crs.gov](http://www.crs.gov)

R45167

## Contents

Introduction .....	1
Domestic Political Situation .....	1
The Economy .....	3
Islamist Terrorism and Muslim Integration .....	3
Foreign and Defense Policy: Selected Issues .....	6
The European Union .....	7
Ukraine and Relations with Russia .....	8
Iran .....	9
Countering the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq .....	9
Counterterrorism Operations in Africa’s Sahel Region.....	10
Relations with the United States.....	11

## Contacts

Author Contact Information .....	13
----------------------------------	----

## Introduction

French President Emmanuel Macron took office in May 2017 promising to shake up a political system he characterized as out of touch, revive the stagnant French economy, and revitalize French leadership of the 28-member European Union (EU). Since that time, he has sought to advance a centrist, reform-oriented domestic agenda while pursuing a “traditional” French foreign and defense policy that emphasizes European integration and a strong French presence in global affairs.

Although Macron has the support of a solid majority in the French parliament, he faces challenges in advancing his ambitious policy agenda, both at home and abroad. Domestically, France has suffered a number of deadly terrorist attacks since January 2015, and some powerful labor unions oppose key elements of Macron’s proposed economic reforms. At the European level, the EU is facing some of the most significant challenges of its 60-year history, including the planned withdrawal of the United Kingdom (also referred to as *Brexit*), tensions related to an upsurge in migrants and refugees to Europe, heightened terrorist threats, and Russian aggression.

Globally, Macron has sought to boost his country’s profile on the world stage. He has advocated a stronger EU and international response to combat terrorism, especially in the Middle East and Africa, where more than 5,000 French troops are carrying out counterterrorism operations. Macron has maintained France’s traditionally strong commitment to the global multilateral security and economic architecture established after World War II, and he is a particularly strong proponent of both free trade and the 2015 U.N. Paris Agreement on climate change.

Despite expressing unease at times about the direction of U.S. foreign policy under President Trump, Macron has made a concerted effort—perhaps more so than any other European leader—to forge a close working relationship with the U.S. President. Accordingly, President Trump is scheduled to host Macron in Washington, D.C., on April 23-25, 2018, for the Trump Presidency’s first official state visit by a foreign leader. In previous meetings and conversations, President Macron and President Trump have stressed their governments’ strong bilateral cooperation in confronting terrorist and other security threats in the Middle East and Africa. This cooperation is likely to remain a key driver of bilateral relations for the near future. However, given President Trump’s widespread unpopularity in France and Europe and a perception that Macron has yet to secure Trump’s support for key French priorities, Macron could face heightened domestic pressure to take a stronger stand against the Trump Administration’s foreign and trade policies.

## Domestic Political Situation

On May 7, 2017, French voters elected Emmanuel Macron of the new centrist *La République En Marche!* (LRM, “Moving the Republic Forward”) political party to a five-year term as France’s new president.<sup>1</sup> Macron defeated Marine Le Pen of the far-right nationalist *Front National* (National Front) by a margin of 66%-34% in the final round of a two-round election. Macron and LRM secured an additional electoral victory in legislative elections in June 2017, winning 308 of the 577 seats in the French parliament’s lower house, the National Assembly.<sup>2</sup> With additional

---

<sup>1</sup> Emmanuel Macron founded *La République En Marche!* (LRM, “Moving the Republic Forward”) in 2016, and it consists largely of political newcomers.

<sup>2</sup> France has a bicameral parliament, composed of the 577-member National Assembly (lower house) and the 348-member Senate (upper house). The National Assembly is considered the more powerful and politically important of the two bodies.

support from the centrist *Mouvement Démocrate* (Democratic Movement), Macron has the formal backing of 350 members of the National Assembly and informal support from at least 35 others.

Macron's electoral victories, and the 2017 election more broadly, represented a major shift in France's political landscape. The presidential election was the first time in the history of France's Fifth Republic (established in 1958) that the top two presidential candidates represented political parties outside the mainstream. Macron and Le Pen's calls to uproot a French political system long dominated by one large center-right and one large center-left party appeared to resonate with a French electorate that has experienced a decade of economic stagnation and a series of terrorist attacks that claimed the lives of more than 240 people since January 2015.

Many viewed Macron's resounding victory as a strong endorsement of his pro-European, pro-free trade perspective. At the same time, analysts point out that voter turnout in the final round of both the presidential and legislative elections was the lowest in at least 40 years. They add that in the presidential election's first round, close to 50% of voters supported parties critical of the EU, free trade, and globalization. Le Pen's 34% in the election's second round also was by far the strongest-ever showing for the National Front in a presidential election.

The 40-year-old Macron is a former investment banker who had no political experience before his 2014 appointment as economy minister by then-President François Hollande of the center-left Socialist Party. In the Hollande government, Macron was the chief architect of widely unpopular efforts to liberalize the labor market and deregulate some sectors of the economy. A key tenet of Macron's policy platform is restoring economic growth and reducing unemployment, including through reforms similar to those he pursued under Hollande.

Macron weathered a significant drop in his approval ratings during his first three months in office—from two-thirds support to about one-third—and March 2018 opinion polls indicate an approval rating of about 42%.<sup>3</sup> Analysts note that a number of factors may have contributed to the initial drop in popularity. Planned spending cuts and economic reforms have sparked the most substantial public opposition, however.

After winning the presidential election, Macron actively sought the support of members of the center-right *Les Républicains* (the Republicans) political party deemed sympathetic to his reform agenda. *Les Républicains*, and its counterpart on the left, the Socialist Party, have long been France's largest political parties.<sup>4</sup> *Les Républicains* is the second-largest party in the National Assembly, with 112 seats. The party is divided, however, over both the extent to which it should oppose Macron's reforms and the broader direction of the party. A faction of the party has joined a centrist group of members of parliament that has given support to the Macron government. The December 2017 election of Laurent Wauquiez, a member of the party's conservative wing, as party leader could heighten internal strife. Wauquiez has pledged to advance an anti-immigration, identity-based platform in an effort to win the support of right-wing voters who supported Le Pen in the 2017 election. The rightward shift could lead to further defections from the party's centrist wing.

The most steadfast and vocal political opposition to Macron's proposed reforms could come from Le Pen's National Front and the far-left *La France Insoumise* (Unbowed France) party led by

---

<sup>3</sup> Economist Intelligence Unit, "Macron's Popularity Falls Amid Raft of Controversial Reforms," March 22, 2018. Anne-Sylvaine Chassany, "France's Emmanuel Macron Gears up for Contentious Labour Reform," *Financial Times*, August 24, 2017.

<sup>4</sup> Macron's efforts included the appointment of *Les Républicains* member Edouard Philippe as prime minister. Under France's presidential system of government, the president exercises a high degree of authority, but the prime minister, as the nominal head of the government, is considered the most influential member of the president's Cabinet.

Jean-Luc Mélenchon. Mélenchon's party, which caucuses with France's Communist Party, has benefited from the misfortunes of the Socialist Party, which lost 241 seats in the recent legislative election (the Socialist Party's political group now has 45 seats in the National Assembly).<sup>5</sup>

## The Economy

Perhaps the key policy concern for French voters is the state of the country's economy. Although France has the world's fifth-largest and the EU's second-largest economy, after Germany, gross domestic product (GDP) has averaged annual growth of below 1% since 2012.<sup>6</sup> France's unemployment rate is about 9.5% and close to 26% for those under the age of 25. Analysts see some recent signs of economic progress, with annual growth expected to reach 1.8% of GDP in 2018, following 1.6% growth in 2017. Unemployment is forecast to drop to 9% in 2018. The Macron government has set a target to decrease unemployment to 7% by 2022.

Macron defends economic liberalism and free markets as essential for boosting economic growth, though he also has stressed the need to ensure that economic benefits are shared by all. He advocates structural reforms that would increase labor market flexibility and deregulate markets. In addition, he argues that the government must reduce public spending, which, at about 56.5% of GDP, is the highest in the EU (as a percentage of GDP).<sup>7</sup>

Macron's first major legislative priority was to take steps to liberalize France's heavily regulated labor market. The controversial legislation, approved by parliament in September 2017, includes measures to make it easier for firms to fire and hire workers and to decentralize labor negotiations, giving more power to individual firms. The government is currently facing an extended strike by railway unions in response to a proposed reform of France's state-owned railway company, SNCF. Macron has said his government plans to focus next on measures to help boost employment, including job training and apprenticeship programs. These measures are expected to be followed by tax reforms designed to increase investment and competitiveness by reducing the tax burden on corporations.<sup>8</sup>

Macron is expected to continue to face vocal public opposition to his economic reform agenda, especially from labor unions. However, his large parliamentary majority could at least partly insulate him from protests. Analysts note that the government has sought to advance the most controversial legislation early in Macron's term, both to allow time to recover from a possible loss in support and to allow time for any potential benefits from the reforms to be realized ahead of the next presidential election in 2022.

## Islamist Terrorism and Muslim Integration

Over the past three years, France has suffered more than 15 terrorist attacks, in which at least 240 people have been killed and more than 600 injured.<sup>9</sup> Although some of these attacks appear to

---

<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless, aside from having vocal leadership, Jean-Luc Mélenchon's and Marine Le Pen's parties have relatively limited representation in the National Assembly—17 seats for *La France Insoumise*, and 8 seats for Le Pen's National Front.

<sup>6</sup> Unless otherwise noted, economic data is from International Monetary Fund, *World Economic Outlook*, October 2017.

<sup>7</sup> Eurostat, "Government Finance Statistics," <http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/government-finance-statistics>.

<sup>8</sup> Economist Intelligence Unit, *Country Report: France*, February 2018.

<sup>9</sup> For more on recent Islamist terrorist attacks in Europe, see CRS In Focus IF10561, *Terrorism in Europe*, by Kristin (continued...)

have been “lone wolf” attacks carried out by individuals acting alone but inspired by Islamist propaganda, others were perpetrated by individuals who were trained by and/or received direct support from terrorist organizations such as the Islamic State. French governments have long viewed Islamist terrorist organizations such as Al Qaeda and, more recently, the Islamic State as the chief security threat facing the country. Coordinated terrorist attacks in November 2015 at six locations throughout Paris prompted a major escalation in what French leaders have characterized as a “war” against the Islamic State.<sup>10</sup>

### Three Most Deadly Terrorist Attacks Since 2015

- In January 2015, three terrorists killed 17 people in three related attacks in Paris that targeted the satirical magazine *Charlie Hebdo*, police officers, and a kosher supermarket. The perpetrators were all French citizens and each had been under state surveillance at various times prior to the attacks. At least one of the attackers reportedly spent time in Yemen with members of Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, and another pledged allegiance to the Islamic State.
- In November 2015, coordinated terrorist attacks in Paris left 130 people dead and more than 350 injured at six locations throughout the city. The attacks constituted the deadliest-ever terrorist incident on French soil. Most of the 11 main perpetrators or accomplices were French citizens (the other attackers officially identified by authorities were Belgian citizens); most if not all of the identified attackers reportedly had spent time with the Islamic State in Syria, and at least two previously had been under state surveillance.
- In July 2016, a Tunisian citizen living in France killed 84 people and injured 202 when he drove a 19-ton truck into a crowd during National Day celebrations in Nice. Although the Islamic State claimed the attacker acted on its behalf, the perpetrator reportedly was self-radicalized a relatively short time before the attack and was previously unknown to counterterrorism authorities.

The number of French citizens training and fighting with terrorist organizations such as the Islamic State has been a particular concern. According to European officials, France, which is home to Europe’s largest Muslim population (an estimated 5.7 million, or about 8.8% of the total population, as of 2017<sup>11</sup>), also has been the source of the largest number of European fighters in Syria and Iraq, most of whom are thought to be fighting with the Islamic State. Estimates indicate that up to 1,600 French nationals have traveled to fight in Syria and Iraq.<sup>12</sup>

At times, French authorities have been criticized for an apparent inability to prevent individuals under state surveillance with known links to violent extremists from carrying out attacks. The fact that one of two assailants who killed an 85-year-old priest in a church in July 2016 was under house arrest and wearing an electronic monitoring device sparked particular outrage throughout France. As noted, the perpetrators of the January 2015 Paris attacks and at least two of the November 2015 assailants reportedly also had been under French state surveillance at various times prior to the attacks.

Observers note that it may be unrealistic to expect any French government to monitor effectively every individual identified as a possible threat, especially given budgetary constraints and the sheer number of potential suspects.<sup>13</sup> The judicial system also is under pressure; the number of

(...continued)

Archick; and CRS Insight IN10209, *European Security and Islamist Terrorism*, by Kristin Archick, Paul Belkin, and Derek E. Mix.

<sup>10</sup> Embassy of France, Washington DC, “Speech by the President of the Republic Before a Joint Session of Parliament,” November 16, 2015, at <http://ambafrance-us.org/spip.php?article7185>.

<sup>11</sup> Pew Research Center, *Europe’s Growing Muslim Population*, November 29, 2017.

<sup>12</sup> As of November 2017, close to 700 French citizens reportedly remained in the region. Centre d’Analyse du Terrorisme, *European Jihad Watch*, November 2017.

<sup>13</sup> Katrin Bennhold and Eric Schmitt, “Gaps in France’s Surveillance Are Clear; Solutions Aren’t,” *New York Times*, (continued...)

terrorism cases being pursued by the office of France's counterterrorism prosecutor reportedly quintupled between 2012 and early 2017, including more than 300 cases against suspects who had returned from Syria.<sup>14</sup> As of February 2018, a national database of potentially "radicalized" individuals reportedly included close to 20,000 individuals.<sup>15</sup>

Before the January 2015 Paris attacks, the French government already had enacted new counterterrorism measures aimed at addressing the large number of French citizens travelling to fight and train in Syria and Iraq. After the January and November 2015 attacks, the government moved to further bolster law-enforcement budgets and capabilities and continued to enact new counterterrorism and counter-radicalization measures. French law-enforcement officials were granted far-reaching authorities under a government-declared state of emergency in place between November 2015 and November 2017. About 13,000 French soldiers (equivalent to roughly 15% of the French army's operational land force) have been deployed to enhance domestic security. Additional measures enacted include surveillance laws allowing the government to monitor the communications of anyone linked to a terrorism investigation and counter-radicalization programs focusing on the French prison system. According to some estimates, at least half of France's 68,000 inmates are Muslim, and several perpetrators of recent terrorist attacks appear to have been radicalized in prison.<sup>16</sup>

Macron has continued to implement counterterrorism policies focused on bolstering law-enforcement and intelligence budgets and granting broad authority to detain and monitor suspects. Most notably, in November 2017, parliament passed a government proposal to make permanent some of the authorities granted under the state of emergency, including the ability to search, seize, and detain some terrorist suspects indefinitely and without a judicial warrant. The law also authorizes continued military patrols in major cities, a significant investment in domestic intelligence collection, and the creation of a new anti-terrorism task force directly under Macron's authority.

Overall, public support for these counterterrorism measures has been strong. Nonetheless, many advocates for French Muslims, and some counterterrorism analysts, have criticized what they view as a heavy-handed, law-enforcement-centric approach to these issues. They argue that to prevent radicalization, the government must do more to integrate Muslims into French society and address the significant socioeconomic disparities between "native" French citizens and those of North African and/or Muslim descent. Some analysts argue that many policies adopted in the name of France's secularist values, including restricting the wearing of head scarves and banning the full face veil, may serve to further alienate Muslims who already feel disenfranchised. They add that stringent new counterterrorism laws also could increase a sense of discrimination and further impede efforts to better integrate French Muslims.<sup>17</sup>

---

(...continued)

February 17, 2015.

<sup>14</sup> Marc Hecker and Elie Tenenbaum, *France vs. Jihadism: The Republic in a New Age of Terror*, IFRI Security Studies Center, January 2017.

<sup>15</sup> Nicolas Boring, "France: Government Announces National Plan to Prevent Radicalization," Library of Congress Global Legal Monitor, February 28, 2018, at <http://www.loc.gov/law/foreign-news/article/france-government-announces-national-plan-to-prevent-radicalization/>.

<sup>16</sup> Farhad Khosrokhavar, "The Mill of Muslim Radicalism in France," *New York Times*, January 25, 2015.

<sup>17</sup> Scott Sayare, "Whatever Happened to France's Famed 'Liberté'?", *New York Times*, March 30, 2017.

## Foreign and Defense Policy: Selected Issues

Macron has followed in the footsteps of past French presidents by seeking to boost his country's profile on the world stage through an assertive foreign policy agenda. At the heart of French foreign policy is a stated desire to spread French values and views, including the principles of democracy and human rights. France sees itself as a global security actor, with interests throughout the world. Despite an emphasis on maintaining strategic autonomy, France prefers to engage international issues in a multilateral framework, above all through the EU.<sup>18</sup> France is one of two EU member states with a permanent seat on the U.N. Security Council, and it will be the only EU member in that position after the United Kingdom's (UK's) planned exit from the EU in 2019. France and the UK are also the EU's only two states with nuclear weapons.

Despite ongoing budgetary pressures, Macron has committed to maintain and develop a full spectrum of military capabilities to assist the pursuit of France's global foreign and defense policy priorities. His government's *2017 Strategic Review of Defense and National Security* outlines two primary objectives: preserving France's strategic autonomy and helping to build a stronger Europe at a time when the EU may be facing "the greatest concentration of challenges [it has] faced."<sup>19</sup> Combatting jihadist terrorism has become a paramount objective of French foreign and defense policy. Over the past decade, France has become a pivotal actor in driving the West's response to terrorist threats in Africa and the Middle East.

The French military is Europe's most globally engaged, and one of its most capable, armed forces (along with the UK). In addition to 13,000 French soldiers deployed in France to enhance domestic security, close to 6,000 French troops currently are participating in military operations in Africa and the Middle East. This figure includes 4,000 troops undertaking counterterrorism operations in Africa's Sahel region and 1,100 troops combatting the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria and supporting Iraqi forces.<sup>20</sup>

In recent years, French military commanders have expressed concern about their ability to sustain the current scope and pace of French military operations without additional resources. Most notably, in July 2017, France's top military commander resigned after an unusually public dispute between him and President Macron over Macron's request for a cut to the 2017 defense budget.<sup>21</sup> Macron had requested the cut in an effort to comply with EU budget-deficit guidelines. He subsequently approved an increase in the 2018 defense budget, bringing France's annual defense budget to about €34.2 billion (about \$42.3 billion), or about 1.8% of GDP.<sup>22</sup>

In February 2018, the Macron government released a six-year proposed defense budget under which annual defense spending would increase until France reaches NATO's defense-spending target of 2% of GDP in 2025. The budget plan, expected to be approved by parliament in mid-2018, would see defense spending rise by €1.7 billion (about \$2.1 billion) annually until 2022 and

---

<sup>18</sup> For more on the historical drivers of French foreign policy, see CRS Report RL32464, *France: Factors Shaping Foreign Policy, and Issues in U.S.-French Relations*, by Paul Belkin.

<sup>19</sup> Ministry of the Armed Forces, *Strategic Review of Defence and National Security 2017–Key Points*, November 2017, at <https://www.defense.gouv.fr/english/dgris/defence-policy/revue-strategique/revue-strategique>.

<sup>20</sup> Ministry of the Armed Forces, *Carte des opérations et missions militaires*, March 8, 2018, at [https://www.defense.gouv.fr/operations/rubriques\\_complementaires/carte-des-operations-et-missions-militaires](https://www.defense.gouv.fr/operations/rubriques_complementaires/carte-des-operations-et-missions-militaires).

<sup>21</sup> Alissa Rubin, "France's Top General Resigns in Dispute over Military Spending," *New York Times*, July 19, 2017.

<sup>22</sup> NATO, *Defence Expenditure of NATO Countries (2009-2017)*, March 15, 2018, at [https://www.nato.int/cps/ic/natohq/news\\_152830.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/ic/natohq/news_152830.htm).

by €3 billion (about \$3.7 billion) annually thereafter.<sup>23</sup> Although French military commanders welcomed the additional resources, some analysts argue that the armed forces could be hard-pressed to maintain their current operational tempo while addressing costly priorities such as the modernization of France's nuclear deterrent. Others note that budgetary pressures could add a degree of urgency to French efforts to forge a more ambitious EU defense policy and to build the capacity of regional partners, particularly in Africa.<sup>24</sup>

## The European Union

France is a founding member of the EU and, along with Germany, has long been considered one of the driving forces behind the European integration project. Although France's firm commitment to safeguarding its independence and strategic autonomy has at times caused friction with Germany and other EU members, French leaders consistently have viewed European political and economic integration as essential to French interests. President Macron is a particularly strong proponent of a more integrated EU and of strong French leadership within the union. Analysts agree, however, that Macron's success in implementing his priorities for the EU could depend greatly on support from Germany, the EU's largest member state and strongest economy.

Macron took office hoping to reinvigorate Franco-German efforts to address a range of major challenges facing the EU. These challenges include *Brexit*; economic difficulties and ongoing challenges to the EU's currency union, the Eurozone; an influx of migrants and refugees; and security challenges posed by heightened terrorism threats and Russian aggression.

Macron has outlined a broad, ambitious vision for increased European integration in areas ranging from fiscal and economic policy to defense policy. Among other things, he has called for further integration within the 19-member Eurozone, including through a common budget, harmonized national tax systems, and a European finance minister. Although many in the EU have voiced support for such reforms, politicians in Germany remain wary of increased fiscal integration and German Chancellor Angela Merkel has indicated that German support for such measures could depend on greater oversight of member state budgets.

Macron also advocates more robust EU cooperation to counter terrorism, both within Europe and abroad. Within Europe, France has advocated initiatives to strengthen the EU's external border controls and enhance intelligence and law-enforcement cooperation. To better address security challenges outside of Europe, Macron has continued France's long-standing support for a more robust EU Common Security and Defense Policy. In particular, France has called on its fellow EU members to enhance military capabilities and increase operational readiness in an effort to address common security challenges.

### France in NATO

France is a major contributor of troops to NATO military operations and a significant financial contributor to the alliance. Historically, however, France's relationship with NATO has been marked by tension. Between 1966, when

<sup>23</sup> Embassy of France, Washington DC, "France Sets Out Defense Plans for 2019-2025," February 21, 2018, at <https://franceintheus.org/spip.php?article8504>.

<sup>24</sup> See, for example, Guillaume Lasconjarias and Florent De Saint-Victor, "Chasing Grandeur? What You Need to Know About the 2017 French Strategic Review," *War on the Rocks*, October 27, 2017, at <https://warontherocks.com/2017/10/chasing-grandeur-what-you-need-to-know-about-the-2017-french-strategic-review/>; and Boris Toucas, *Understanding the Implications of France's Strategic Review on Defense and National Security*, Center for Strategic and International Studies, October 19, 2017.

then-President Charles de Gaulle withdrew the country from NATO's integrated command structures, and 2009, when then-President Nicolas Sarkozy announced France's full reintegration into those structures, France had very limited participation in the alliance's military decision-making. France's commitment to strategic autonomy and its unease with U.S. leadership in Europe and NATO were key factors behind the withdrawal.

Over the past decade, France has become an increasingly active NATO member, and it was one of the top troop contributors to the alliance's 2003-2014 stabilization mission in Afghanistan. France has come to view NATO as an important and powerful organization through which to address common security threats. France has supported NATO's efforts to deter Russian aggression since Russia's illegal annexation of Ukraine's Crimea region in 2014 and about 300 French troops are deployed to a German-led NATO battalion in Lithuania as part of NATO's Enhanced Forward Presence (EFP) in Central and Eastern Europe. At the same time, France has urged its fellow NATO allies to focus more on security threats to NATO's south, particularly in Africa and the Middle East. France also has maintained a degree of skepticism regarding alliance initiatives viewed as potentially infringing on France's ability to maintain full autonomy over its military and defense industry, including some initiatives for allies to pool and share military capabilities or for NATO to develop jointly-funded capabilities.

## Ukraine and Relations with Russia

France has joined fellow EU member states in strongly condemning Russia's illegal annexation of Ukraine's Crimea region and Russia's broader aggression in Ukraine. It also has supported EU decisions to provide aid to the Ukrainian government and impose targeted sanctions on Russia's financial, defense, and energy sectors. Along with Germany, Russia, and Ukraine, France is a member of the so-called Normandy Format, which has negotiated two cease-fire agreements—the Minsk Agreements—to the conflict in eastern Ukraine since mid-2014. As one of the two European negotiators in the Normandy Format, France is considered a leading European voice on Ukraine and Russia policy. Many observers assert, however, that Germany has played the more active role in the negotiations and in shaping broader European policy on Russia and Ukraine.<sup>25</sup>

In the past, some critics of French policy toward Russia questioned France's commitment to sustaining sanctions against Moscow. In particular, they cited a perceived reluctance to further exacerbate tensions with Russia and concern that sanctions could hinder opportunities for cooperation with Russia in the Middle East and harm French and European business interests. When he was part of the Hollande government, Macron argued against extending sanctions on Russia.<sup>26</sup> However, Macron has since voiced stronger support for sanctions, particularly after his presidential campaign alleged that it was hacked by Russian operatives.<sup>27</sup> In early January 2018, Macron announced his intention to propose a new law that would grant media regulators more authority over websites that distribute fake news, including by imposing fines.<sup>28</sup> In March 2018, France joined Germany, the UK, and the United States to strongly condemn alleged Russian involvement in a nerve-agent attack in the UK on British citizen and former Russian spy Sergei Skripal and his daughter. France also expelled four Russian diplomats in response to the nerve-agent attack.<sup>29</sup>

<sup>25</sup> See, for example, Anne-Sylvaine Chassany and Stefan Wagstyl, "Ukraine Ceasefire Talks Revive Franco-German Entente," *Financial Times*, March 18, 2015.

<sup>26</sup> Nicholas Vinocur, "France's Lower House Calls on EU to Lift Russia Sanctions," Politico.eu, April 28, 2016.

<sup>27</sup> Michael Stothard and Kathrin Hille, "Macron Campaign Accuses Russia of Using Fake News to Disrupt Presidential Race," *Financial Times*, February 13, 2017.

<sup>28</sup> Joanna Plucinska, "Macron Proposes New Law Against Fake News," Politico.eu, January 4, 2018.

<sup>29</sup> Quai d'Orsay, "Statement by Jean-Yves Le Drian, Minister for Europe and Foreign Affairs," March 26, 2018, at <https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/en/country-files/russia/events/article/quai-d-orsay-russia-statement-by-jean-yves-le-drian-minister-for-europe-and>.

## Iran

France has been at the forefront of EU and international efforts to curtail Iran's nuclear program, including EU sanctions enacted between 2010 and 2012 and the 2015 international agreement to roll back sanctions in exchange for limits on Iran's nuclear program—the so-called Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA).

Macron has joined European leaders in urging President Trump to remain committed to the JCPOA, which France and the EU view as a major diplomatic achievement that has successfully curbed Iran's nuclear program. In an effort to maintain U.S. support for the JCPOA, France has been leading negotiations with the United States to address what President Trump has said he considers significant shortcomings of the agreement; chief among these perceived shortcomings are the fact that the JCPOA does not address Iran's ballistic missile program; its aggressive activities in the region, including in Syria; and its support for terrorism. Macron has sought to act as a mediator between Tehran, the EU, and the United States in attempting to address these issues.

Paris has strongly condemned Iran's ballistic missile program and its destabilizing activities in the Middle East. Macron has advocated new U.N. sanctions on Tehran for its missile program and international surveillance of that program. France also has called for discussions regarding Iran's broader activities in the region and on what to do when limitations imposed on Iran under the JCPOA expire in 2025.<sup>30</sup> France, Germany, and the UK have stated strongly that these concerns should be addressed in separate, new agreements and/or sanctions rather than by renegotiating the JCPOA. They fear that opening the JCPOA for renegotiation could imperil the agreement, lead Iran to renew its nuclear weapons program, and further destabilize the region.

As of mid-April 2018, France and its EU counterparts had not reached agreement with the United States on new sanctions against Iran or on launching formal negotiations with Tehran. In an apparent effort to demonstrate European intentions to continue to press forward in addressing outstanding concerns, EU member states have discussed a proposal to impose new EU sanctions on Iran in response to its activities in Syria. Some member states are concerned, however, that such new measures could lead to a breakdown of the JCPOA.<sup>31</sup>

Despite what many perceive to be the relatively hard line of the French government against Iran, French companies have expressed interest in possible investment opportunities in Iran. Iranian President Hassan Rouhani visited Paris in January 2016, where he met with then-President Hollande and announced several trade deals, including with aircraft manufacturer Airbus.

## Countering the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq

As the former colonial ruler of Syria (1920-1946), France has a particular interest in the country and has maintained some degree of influence in Syrian affairs. France was an early leader of international efforts to pressure the regime of Bashar al Asad, consistently calling for stronger action in support of moderate Syrian rebel groups. The Hollande government favored taking military action against Asad in late 2013 and opposed the U.S. decision not to authorize such action. Since the emergence of the Islamic State, French officials have continued to call unequivocally for Asad's ouster but also have stressed that a post-Asad government should preserve at least some existing state institutions.

<sup>30</sup> Karen DeYoung, "Europeans Look for a Way to Preserve Nuclear Deal Whilst Punishing Iran and Satisfying Trump," *Washington Post*, February 23, 2018.

<sup>31</sup> Michael Peel, "EU Members Fail to Agree Fresh Sanctions Before May Deadline," *Financial Times*, April 16, 2018.

Along with the United States, France has been at the forefront of the international coalition conducting military operations against the Islamic State in Iraq. Until September 2015, France had ruled out conducting operations in Syria in part because it did not want to inadvertently support the Asad regime, but it changed course due to growing concerns about the Islamic State. Since then, France has launched airstrikes on Islamic State targets throughout Syria. About 1,100 French troops currently contributing to the mission, which is also supported by naval vessels and fighter aircraft.

On April 13, 2018, France joined the UK and the United States in launching coordinated airstrikes against Syrian targets in retaliation for a suspected chemical attack allegedly perpetrated by the Asad regime against its own citizens on April 7, 2018. President Macron had announced previously that France had proof of the chemical attack and of the Asad regime's responsibility.<sup>32</sup> In a televised address following the retaliatory strikes, Macron said that despite President Trump's previous statements that the U.S. would withdraw swiftly from Syria, France had "convinced [President Trump] that we needed to stay [in Syria] for the long term."<sup>33</sup> Macron subsequently clarified that he was referring to the need for longer-term diplomatic engagement to build a stable and peaceful Syria, but he stressed that the United States and France remained committed to withdrawing military assets once the Islamic State had been defeated.<sup>34</sup>

## Counterterrorism Operations in Africa's Sahel Region

France deployed its military to Mali in January 2013 to counter an advance by local Islamist armed groups that had asserted control over much of the country's territory (Operation *Serval*). In 2014, France reorganized its military assets in Africa to focus on combatting terrorism in the Sahel on a regional and enduring basis. The counterterrorism operation, dubbed Operation *Barkhane*, is comprised of about 4,000 troops stationed at three "permanent support points" in Ndjamen, Chad; Niamey, Niger; and Gao, Mali, and at least six additional forward-operating sites in the region.<sup>35</sup> The bulk of these troops previously had been deployed to Operation *Serval*. France has sought to bolster the participation of regional actors in its counterterrorism efforts and says that part of Operation *Barkhane*'s mission is to build the counterterrorism capacity of the so-called "G5 Sahel"—Mauritania, Mali, Niger, Chad, and Burkina Faso—which has sought to coordinate a regional response to security and development challenges and appealed for donor support.

Thus far, Operation *Barkhane* appears to have focused primarily on combating terrorist groups in northern Mali to secure gains made during previous military operations and on preventing the regional flow of terrorists and weapons from southern Libya into northern Niger. French operations also have focused on the tri-border region linking northeastern Mali, northern Burkina Faso, and western Niger, an epicenter of emerging Islamist extremist activity that the G5 Sahel has prioritized, as well.

---

<sup>32</sup> Embassy of France, Washington DC, "Intervention of the French Armed Forces in Response to the Use of Chemical Weapons in Syria," April 14, 2018, at <https://franceintheus.org/spip.php?article8603>.

<sup>33</sup> Angelique Chrisafis and Jon Henley, "Macron: I Never Said U.S. and France Would Stay in Syria for the Long Term," *The Guardian*, April 16, 2018.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>35</sup> Headquartered in Ndjamen, Operation *Barkhane* includes reconnaissance and fighter aircraft and other intelligence assets, along with special operations forces; its forces also draw on a longstanding military logistics hub in Côte d'Ivoire. See French Ministry of Armed Forces, at <http://www.defense.gouv.fr/operations/sahel/dossier-de-presentation-de-l-operation-barkhane/operation-barkhane>.

France has pressed for international diplomatic and financial support for the G5 and a new G5 “joint force” of up to 5,000 military and police personnel to counter terrorism, drug trafficking, and illicit migration in the Sahel. Among other reasons, French support for the G5 initiatives could reflect a broader desire to reduce France’s military footprint and leadership role in counterterrorism operations in the region over the long term.

France has sought and received U.S. logistical assistance for its African counterterrorism operations, including up to \$95 million between 2013 and 2015 in U.S. defense services related to troop transportation and aerial refueling in Mali and the wider *Barkhane* area of operation.<sup>36</sup> According to U.S. officials, U.S. intelligence is also shared and French operations in the Sahel at times reportedly have targeted U.S.-designated terrorists. However, the United States reportedly successfully impeded a 2017 French effort at the U.N. to secure a U.N.-assessed finding mechanism for the new G5 task force. U.S. reluctance to establish additional formal financial obligations reportedly was a factor behind its opposition.

## Relations with the United States

France is an important U.S. ally, though the relationship has not been without tensions. In recent years, U.S. leaders have welcomed French foreign policy and military engagement, especially with respect to counterterrorism operations in the Sahel and in the fight against the Islamic State. Despite disagreements on a range of important issues and President Trump’s widespread unpopularity in Europe, both President Macron and President Trump have made a concerted effort to improve bilateral ties.

In July 2017, Trump visited Paris to participate in ceremonies marking the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the United States’ entry into World War I. During President Trump’s 2017 visit to Paris, both leaders emphasized common goals and plans for enhanced cooperation while downplaying differences over issues such as climate change and migration. President Trump is scheduled to host Macron on April 23-25, 2018, for the first official state visit by a foreign leader during Trump’s presidency.

For President Macron, close cooperation with the United States could be vital to addressing key French foreign and security policy goals, including countering terrorism and bringing peace and stability to the Middle East. For President Trump, the French president could be an important, and supportive, interlocutor within a European Union that is at best skeptical of the U.S. President. U.S.-French relations could take on added importance as the UK—historically the United States’ closest ally in Europe—prepares to leave the EU, and as France seeks to resume a more assertive leadership role in the union.

A primary goal for Macron during his state visit to the United States could be to build support from Trump for continuing to uphold the JCPOA. Should President Trump decide not to certify Iranian compliance with the agreement in May 2018, Macron could face growing calls at home to distance himself from the U.S. President who remains deeply unpopular in France and Europe. However, the French president is likely to continue to emphasize the importance of close ties with

---

<sup>36</sup> Defense Security Cooperation Agency, report to Congress in accordance with Section 506(b)(2) of the Foreign Assistance Act of 1961, as amended. U.S. funding was provided under the President’s special drawdown authority. The FY2016 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) created a new authority enabling such support to continue through FY2018 (P.L. 114-92, §1207). This authority was, in turn, repealed and superseded under the FY2017 NDAA by a new statutory authority for the provision of operational assistance to friendly nations, 10 U.S.C. 331.

the United States, especially in response to key shared security challenges, such as the fight against the Islamic State and other Islamic terrorist groups in the Middle East and Africa.

Presidents Trump and Macron continue to disagree on a range of key foreign policy issues. Perhaps most fundamentally, President Macron is a vocal proponent of multilateralism and the system of multilateral institutions developed following World War II, including the EU, U.N., and NATO. Macron is also an ardent supporter of free trade. Along with his European counterparts, Macron lobbied strongly for President Trump to exempt the EU from new U.S. tariffs on steel and aluminum imports announced by the Trump Administration in March 2018. Although the Administration granted the EU a temporary exemption from the new tariffs, France and most of its fellow EU members continue to oppose the Administration's broader trade policy.

President Macron also has spoken out against the Trump Administration's announced intention to withdraw from the Paris Agreement on climate change, negotiated during and supported by the Obama Administration. Combatting climate change is a key domestic and foreign policy priority of the Macron government. Macron has been steadfast in his commitment to implementing and upholding the Paris Agreement as it stands, with or without the United States, but he has said he would welcome the United States back into the accord should the Trump Administration reverse course.

Despite close military cooperation in countering the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq, Macron has criticized other aspects of U.S. policy in the Middle East. In December 2017, Macron joined EU leaders in strongly opposing President Trump's announcement that the United States would recognize Jerusalem as the capital of Israel. As discussed above, Macron also has urged the U.S. president to uphold the international agreement on Iran's nuclear program by recertifying Iranian compliance in May 2018, as required by U.S. legislation approving the JCPOA. More broadly, Macron has advocated sustained U.S. diplomatic engagement to bring about a longer-term solution to the conflict in Syria.

U.S.-French defense and intelligence cooperation have grown markedly closer over the past decade, especially as both countries have prioritized global counterterrorism operations. This is particularly true in Africa, where France has a long history and a significant military footprint. According to some analysts, U.S.-French cooperation in Africa is closer today than it has ever been. In a reflection of the deepening relationship, following the November 2015 terrorist attacks in Paris, the Obama Administration announced that the United States would strengthen the sharing of intelligence and operational military information with French authorities to "the fullest extent allowed by law."<sup>37</sup>

Following President Trump's inauguration in January 2017, the U.S. and French Defense Secretaries reaffirmed their commitment to a November 2016 Joint Statement of Intent outlining specific areas for enhanced bilateral defense cooperation. These areas include shared strategic assessments to better understand and prepare for future challenges beyond and within Europe; increased mutual support in operations, especially in the Middle East and Africa; continued progress in the exchange of "operational military intelligence"; and expanded cooperation in the cyber domain.<sup>38</sup>

---

<sup>37</sup> Cheryl Pellerin, "U.S., France to Strengthen Intelligence Sharing," DoD News, November 16, 2015, at <https://www.defense.gov/News/Article/Article/630024/us-france-to-strengthen-intelligence-sharing/>.

<sup>38</sup> Department of Defense, "U.S., France Sign Bilateral Cooperation Agreements," November 28, 2016, at <https://www.defense.gov/News/Article/Article/1014192/us-france-sign-bilateral-cooperation-agreements>.

## **Author Contact Information**

Paul Belkin  
Analyst in European Affairs  
pbelkin@crs.loc.gov, 7-0220