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INTERVIEW GRANTED TO AL-JAZEERA BY THE FRENCH PRESIDENT EMMANUEL MACRON

JOURNALIST

Mr President, good evening.

THE PRESIDENT

Good evening, welcome.

JOURNALIST

Thank you for agreeing to this interview with Al Jazeera. France has suffered attacks twice in the last two weeks, and is doubly in shock: in a school in Conflans-Sainte-Honorine, and in a church in Nice. The Muslim world is watching and you, yourself, are watching the reactions across the Muslim world. What would you like to say to the Muslim world today?

THE PRESIDENT

Thank you for coming, and you are quite right in pointing out that our country has been struck three times by terrorist acts committed by violent extremists who did so by distorting, hijacking Islam, and with acts that have utterly stunned and wounded the people of France: the decapitation of a teacher because he was freely teaching; and in Nice on Thursday in a church, the Notre Dame Basilica, the decapitation of two people and a knife attack upon a third. Today France is reeling from these attacks, not only with a feeling of sadness, and unity also, but also with anger. And there were, for the first time, while we were still in the throes of these unfolding attacks, very strong reactions I would say internationally, criticizing France on the basis of a whole series of misunderstandings. That is why I would like to clear them up, including here, with you, because I have seen what is sometimes said on your social networks, on your channel, and I think that it is time to dispel many misunderstandings. My first comment, if I may, is for those French people who identify as being of the Catholic faith, since they suffered a very painful wound yesterday. I wish to reiterate to them our full support, the protection of the French Republic. A few minutes ago I was talking with the Pope, discussing this very issue. Secondly, more broadly, I should like to reiterate that France is a country that sets great store by religious freedom and what we often refer to as *laïcité*, the complicated French conceptualization of secularism that so often gives rise to misunderstandings which, I hope, we will be able to dispel today, and which, I would remind listeners, is a freedom to believe or not to believe, but which makes France a country in which we hope that everyone feels equally a citizen, regardless of one's religion, and where everybody enjoys the same political and civic rights irrespective of their religion and where society, in some ways, encompasses all of the religions practised therein, and where, importantly, transcendence has its place in society, but where the guarantor of this right, for one and all, is the State. And what I would like to make clear, as opposed to what I have heard bandied about over the last few days, is that our country is one that has no problems with any of the world's religions whatsoever, because they are all practised freely in our country. And to all French people of the Muslim faith, and indeed to citizens from anywhere else in the world whose religion is Islam, I should like to say to them that France is a country in which this religion, too, is freely practised. There is no stigmatisation; all that is untrue. It is a country, moreover, whose overarching vocation is to strive for peace, to be able to thrive, no matter which religion a person may follow. So a lot of falsehoods have been bandied about. I want to deliver a very firm message here against terrorism, against all those violent extremists, and at the same time an equally strong message of peace, of unity, of reinstated truth. That is the main goal of my exchange with you today.

JOURNALIST

Bearing in mind that Muslims are the primary victims of the violence, they are still paying the price. With regard to the cartoons that have been published in France on more than one occasion, these caricatures that depict the prophet of Islam, it is Muslims, all Muslims, each time, that feel wounded, shocked and at times misunderstood. To what extent can Muslims' feelings be taken into consideration?

THE PRESIDENT

You are referring to, and thus we can start with one of the misunderstandings from these last few weeks, or at least a misinterpretation or, if I were to word it more strongly, the starting point for numerous manipulations: this issue of the caricatures. This is not a new issue. I remember that some fifteen years ago now it led to dreadful controversy with Denmark, too, and France lent its support at the time, and today again, with France.

Our country has a history, and the history of our country involves the construction of the *res publica* as being removed from religion. Often, this is also what we are referring to when we talk of France's secularism, or *laïcité*, because France's history was primarily steeped in the Catholic faith. We created our laws, which stemmed from the ideas of the Enlightenment; our laws which are an emanation of the people of France itself, of this sovereign people. And in our laws, our principles, our rights, individual freedoms are enshrined; religious freedom, as I mentioned, which we defend and which is exercised in our country, but also the freedom of thought and the freedom of expression. This means that in our country, in France, any journalist is free to speak about the French President, the Government, the political majority or minority or indeed the rest of the world. Included within this freedom of expression is the possibility, also, of drawing pictures, of making caricatures. This is within our rights. It is a longstanding right, dating back to the late nineteenth century. It is important to defend it because it stems from the will of the French people, and we are sovereign in our own country. This right has meant that there are caricatures in our newspapers, and we also have a history of this. And these caricatures poke fun at our political leaders – and yours truly is a prime target thereof – and this is understandable, and also at many religions, at all religions. And while we are on the subject of caricatures, it is important to bear in mind that numerous publications, including *Charlie Hebdo*, which has received so much attention, have first and foremost caricatured the deity of Christians, caricatured the Jewish religion, Rabbis, etc., and these days, in recent years, also, caricatured the prophet Muhammad, thus actually also caricaturing the Muslim religion. Personally, I can understand the feelings that this may arouse, I respect those feelings, but I need you to understand what my role is. My role is to restore calm, as I am doing now, but at the same time my role is to safeguard rights. And there is a difference here, which it is vital for any Muslims who may have taken offence to understand. The issue is not about whether France, or the French President acting on its behalf, made such caricatures or supports their content – this is not the issue at stake because the press is free to publish what it will; these are not official publications and it is not the French Government producing these caricatures – the issue is, rather, whether the French President is willing to do away with this right: the answer is no, because this is a right of the French people and because everyone is treated in the same way. And so the key point is that I have a duty to safeguard this freedom. Naturally, I want all of this to happen in a spirit of mutual respect, but this freedom is crucial. And so a lot has been said these last few weeks about the caricatures, and some might disapprove, which is perfectly fine. Moreover, the same goes for people in France or in other countries where there is freedom of expression, and I find it only natural that there be those who speak out against it and say: "We disagree with this". I, for one, disagree... But there are two things that I cannot accept. The first thing is the confusion peddled by swathes of the media, and some political and religious leaders, whereby these caricatures are painted as being some kind of ploy or emanation on the part of the French Government or the President of France. No. As I see it, my job is to preserve this right and I shall continue to preserve it. But there are those who exercise this right, that's just the way it is. And the second thing that I cannot accept is for this disapproval to be used as a justification, directly or indirectly, for violence. I am not a specialist in theology, but I have never viewed Islam as legitimizing or fostering the recourse to violence of any kind. And so, while I can understand and respect the fact that some people may be upset by these caricatures, I will never accept anyone justifying any physical violence on account of these caricatures, and I shall continue defending the freedom in my country to speak, to write, to think and to draw. This does not mean that I, personally, approve of everything that others may say, think or draw, but it does mean that these liberties, these human rights which were pondered, desired and created in France, well, I do believe that we have a duty to protect them, as well as to protect the sovereignty of the French people.

JOURNALIST

Mr President, my questions to you are some of the questions that are raised from time to time in the Arab world and the Muslim world, based on some of your own statements. In your speech during the tribute to the teacher who was murdered, Mr Samuel Paty, you stated, and I quote, "We will not disavow the caricatures, the drawings, even if others recoil." This firmness is based on the freedom of expression, but in the heat of the moment, it is interpreted as a kind of challenge and lack of consideration for Muslims' feelings. How to assess this?

THE PRESIDENT

Well, this is precisely what I have just explained. But first of all, let us start with the sentence that you have just quoted, and I want to thank you for citing it accurately; in the translations of that sentence by many media across the Arab world, which I saw on social networks, it was twisted into a falsehood. Those unfaithful translations would have had me saying: "I support the caricatures humiliating the prophet". I never said any such thing. Firstly, because these caricatures – and it's important for all our Muslim listeners to take this on board – these caricatures address all religions, all of them – it's not a case of caricatures especially singling out one targeted religion instead of another – and on top of that, all leaders. Secondly, it is as I said, that I would safeguard this right because that is my role, and that I furthermore believe that in a society, we need to be able to accept, to accommodate this respect with one another. But it is not up to me, as President of France, to diminish this right because some people might take offence. This is what I need you to understand, because if I were to do that, I would be establishing in my country some kind of moral order or religious order. I would be saying to those who write or illustrate: "You are not to say such-and-such because others will get upset." And step by step, freedom of expression would dwindle because it would become a space that would render it

impossible to say anything about anyone any more. And this is where the difficulty lies with our approach, collectively, and with the approach of the Enlightenment, the values that we hold dear, which extend beyond the mere fact of coexisting side by side, and include agreeing to allow commentary on one another in a calm manner, with the respect in which I trust, sometimes to make fun of one another, regardless of our religion or our philosophy, but always agreeing to do this in a respectful and peaceful way. And with regard to my statement that you quoted, and the reactions across the Muslim world, I feel firstly that they came about because of the many lies, the misconstrued distortions that I mentioned, and the fact that people were under the impression that I, personally, approved of these caricatures. To them, I would say: that is beside the point. What is important to me is that in my country one can write, think and draw freely because I believe that it is important, that it is a right, that these are our freedoms. I understand that some may find it upsetting, I respect that, which proves that it needs to be discussed. It needs to be talked about. A space for respect and mutual understanding needs to be created. But I do not think that the solution would be to eliminate this right, let alone to justify any form of violence because of its upsetting nature.

JOURNALIST

With regard to the cartoons, of course, this issue which is still such a hot topic, and still in the headlines, Muslims are against any caricatures, be they of Moses, Jesus or the Virgin Mary, but they have noticed that the illustrations, the caricatures of Muhammad, the prophet of Islam, are easily replicated. Publishing them is easy, republishing them, there is this repetition, as if it were very easy to caricature the prophet of Islam, more so than for others.

THE PRESIDENT

No, as I have said, this is firstly factually incorrect and it is untrue in the context of this issue. Catholics in our country have also sometimes been outraged at what they have seen; I know that Jewish people have also had cause; and this proves that it needs to be discussed. You know, when it affects you personally, and here I am not talking about caricatures of a religion, but of a leader, you might not like it, but the fact that you don't like it or that you find it shocking in no way justifies, as I said before, any violence. But I disagree with the idea that there is some kind of stigmatisation in this. That is incorrect. And I also want to insist on the fact that freedom of expression extends far beyond mere caricatures, although this is part of it. All in all, I think that we must not slip into a pattern of provocation and counter-provocation. I wanted to restate the facts as they stand, and how we got here. These illustrations were drawn in France, and the applicable law in France is not the law of Islam; it is the law of the sovereign French people. And it is they who decide, and moreover these laws date from the nineteenth century. With what authority could I possibly, on the grounds that a religion takes issue with a certain representation or a certain word, go and outlaw it? I cannot do that and neither do I think that this falls under my remit. And so my hope is that, together, hence this message... I hope to dispel the lies and ambiguities, and I want to address Muslims all around the world and say: in your countries there are undoubtedly things with which some religions, or perhaps nationals from my own country, take issue. Do they attack you because they don't like those things, because they find them shocking? No. We need to learn to understand each other better, to take on board the reason behind our respective laws, our respective customs. But there is nothing in these caricatures, in this freedom of expression, that speaks against any one religion, and certainly not against Islam. But there is the importance in our country — and many other countries, I also note with some sadness, many countries in the world have given up on freedom of expression in recent decades because of controversies, out of fear, due to the chaos unleashed by exactly these kinds of reactions. And so there is a kind of cutback in this freedom to draw, to discuss, to be at times provocative, which I think undermines our freedom, for all of us. Rest assured of one thing, here, in particular, yours truly, as President of the French Republic, respects all of his fellow citizens here in France, but also citizens from around the world, regardless of their religion. And I set great store by that respect.

But I want you to understand what the exercise of this freedom in France and in other countries means and that a mark of my respect is also to offer Muslims the same treatment as is offered to followers of any religion, to try to create this space of respect which can accept humour, difference. I might have something to say when things cause outrage, not so as to ban them or lessen them, but so as to discuss them together.

JOURNALIST

Often when Islam is discussed in France, Muslims cite anti-Semitism. Why are there laws against anti-Semitism? Why are there laws that close debate on certain historical facts? For example, revisionism, things like that, in which one cannot... which are protected by French law.

THE PRESIDENT

Yes, that's correct.

JOURNALIST

Is there no possibility of envisaging laws to protect their sacred symbols?

THE PRESIDENT

Well, you are mixing up two things: history, respect among peoples, and religions. France is working to combat

Then, you are mixing up two things: history, respect among peoples, and religion. France is working to combat anti-Semitism and racism in every form and anti-Semitism in that it is an attack, a challenge, hatred against one people, but against all peoples. Anti-Semitism and racism in France are being tackled and are prohibited by law. And so there is not only a fight against anti-Semitism, it would be incorrect to assert as such: all racism is prohibited. And yet, by the same token, we have in France the right to caricature – to pick up on our conversation a moment ago – to criticize the Jewish religion, as with any religion. There is therefore no double standard, there is no partiality. That is untrue, simply untrue. There is indeed a law in France against historical revisionism because many people used Holocaust denial as a basis for anti-Semitism. That is a historical fact. But in France, all we are doing is addressing a historical fact. You can look to other countries if you want to see how to cover up some genocide or avoid teaching some painful episode of history; not to France. We acknowledge the facts squarely, including crimes that we ourselves have committed. Remember how Jacques Chirac, 25 years ago now, recognized the responsibility of the French State in the Second World War. We have accepted blame for our part in slavery and colonialism. France thus looks back on its history with honesty, but expects others to do the same, so that hatred cannot feed on some revised, modified or false version of history. And when all is said and done, it is not the Government's province to write history; that is up to historians. All forms of racism and anti-Semitism are against the law in France. So, does this mean that the problem doesn't exist? Indeed it does exist, and it is a dreadful scourge, and we are combatting it. I have asked the Government to do more in this fight, right from the start of my term in office, and in fact my predecessors, too, of all political stripes, did the same thing, not only because there had been a lot of violence against Jews in France in recent years, but also because of acts committed out of racism, which are unacceptable. We tackle all of these acts in the same manner. On the other hand, as I was saying, it is possible to criticize religions. And then, there is the separate issue of acts being undertaken that target certain religions. And in this regard, I mean to be very clear, I hope that we are intransigent. But in France today, as we speak, there are those who commit acts against Muslims because they are Muslims, against Catholics because they are Catholics, against Protestants because they are Protestants, against Jews because they are Jews, and so on. And that is why, as it happens, I wanted the Minister of the Interior to be able to entrust a parliamentarian with the task of identifying, monitoring and improving transparency around any acts committed on French soil against our fellow citizens on the grounds of religion.

JOURNALIST

In the wake of the criticism of France in recent weeks, now there is the boycott campaign. What is your reaction to this boycott campaign?

THE PRESIDENT

It is disgraceful and I condemn it. Yet it is coming from certain private groups because they have not understood and have based their actions on lies, on caricatures, sometimes from other leaders. It is unacceptable. Because, do you understand what is happening over the caricatures? In France, which is a sovereign country, I decide that the law, the law that the sovereign people want, should be applied, and I myself have words of appeasement, but I say that I am not going to renounce this law because that would be unconstitutional and a terrible loss of sovereignty for us. For that, because people confuse this position, which I believe is incontrovertible, with support for them, they attack a State. But as I also tell many leaders, the press in France is free. In many countries that have called for the boycott, the press is no longer free, that is to say caricatures are out of the question, and not only of the Prophet or God or Moses, but of the country's leaders themselves. They sometimes print caricatures of foreign leaders, but not of the country in which they live because the cartoonists' hands have been broken, because journalists have sometimes been killed or imprisoned. That is not the case in France. So when a newspaper in France says something, it is not the government's position. And deciding to boycott a country, a people, because a newspaper has said something in our country, that is crazy. Or it is just transposing what applies in certain countries, but not in ours and not in the free world because a journalist's words are not propaganda. That does not exist anymore in our country, I'm pleased to say.

JOURNALIST

Do you fear repercussions against French nationals abroad, against French companies abroad?

THE PRESIDENT

I think that any political or religious leaders who do not clearly condemn all forms of violence against France, which is a country of freedom and Enlightenment, take a definite responsibility, sometimes direct or otherwise indirect, for any violence committed against the French people in France or abroad. That is why this message of friendship and appeasement I want to send today is also a call for responsibility. I have seen too many people in recent days say unacceptable things about France, subscribe to all the lies that have been told about us, about what I might have said, and become tacit parties to the worst. I would like you to understand what we are doing in France. We have been fighting terrorism, forcefully, for years. It has cost the lives of over 300 of our fellow citizens and sometimes other nationals living in our country. This terrorism, committed in the name of Islam, is a scourge for Muslims worldwide. You said it yourself earlier. You know, when you look at what are taken to be the official figures today, if you take the last forty years in the world, over 80% of the victims of this terrorism have been Muslims. When young girls are kidnapped by groups in Nigeria in the name of Islam, it is these young girls whose families are Muslim who are the victims of this terrorism. When a maternity hospital is

bombed, when ... and I could cite dozens of examples ... the main victims of the terrorism committed in the name of Islam are Muslims. We are fighting this terrorism because it is hitting us on our soil. Then there is a second category that I have decided to combat, and on this point there have been misunderstandings due to an interpretation problem. This is what we call in France radical Islamism. What does it mean? It means violent extremists who distort the religion and commit violent acts within Islam. And this fight I am waging has been interpreted as a fight against Islam. No, far from it. France is a country where there are several million of our fellow citizens whose religion is Islam. I have no intention of fighting them. They are upstanding citizens. They want to live in peace. And we have friendly countries everywhere whose majority religion is Islam. Yet today, in the name of Islam and distorting this religion, violent extremists are doing the worst. And they are not terrorists. But what are they doing? They take children out of school, they indoctrinate them and they justify the violence. They act on our soil in France in association with groups abroad. And so what we have been working on resolutely for three years is on trying to reduce their grip to protect our people and to protect also, among others, French Muslims because they are nurturing a feeling that could be harmful to them. So precisely friendship among religions. Because as all of this is done in the name of a religion, a misunderstanding arises. So what I reiterated in my speech in Les Mureaux at the beginning of October is my determination through an upcoming bill, which we have called separatism, but to be perfectly clear is a bill to combat these violent extremist groups and people who act in the name of Islam, my determination to protect all the French people and particularly those whose religion is Islam. So what are we going to do? We will prevent them from taking children of the French Republic out of school. We will prevent them from receiving funds from terrorist activities to enable them to conduct their activities. So we will create financial transparency. And above all, we will ensure what I feel is essential in France that everyone, irrespective of their faith – which is not my concern – irrespective of their religion, fully respects the laws of the French Republic. That is essential. So that is what we are doing. But I would like to make a distinction between these extremists who commit the worst or justify the worst, sometimes with highly sophisticated, dangerous rhetoric, and Muslims. Everywhere in the Muslim world in recent weeks, attempts have been made to amalgamate the two by twisting what I've said, putting words into my mouth, saying that the President of the French Republic and therefore France has a problem with Islam. No, we have no problem with Islam, none whatsoever. Our intellectual and cultural history is intertwined with Islam. We are one of the first countries to have translated the Coran. It has been translated and taught at the Sorbonne in France since the 17th century, where important debates have been held on the subject. We are one of the first countries to have opened a magnificent mosque in the heart of the capital, the Grand Mosque of Paris. And ask our religious representatives, the President of the French Council of the Muslim Faith, the Rector of the Grand Mosque, and they will tell you precisely what I have just said. So the combat in which we are engaged, which is a combat vital for our generations, is a combat against terrorism, against violent extremism and all the narratives that justify this violence in the name of Islam, but a combat to protect our fellow citizens in all countries around the world, irrespective of their religion, including Muslims.

JOURNALIST

Islam, you used the word in your speech in Les Mureaux, especially in that often quoted and published sentence, and I quote, "Islam is a religion that is currently experiencing a crisis all over the world." Obviously, this sentence was said in a speech that lasted 70 minutes, but the focus fell on this sentence, which has offended many people. What, Mr President, do you mean by this sentence and this analysis?

THE PRESIDENT

That is what I was just talking about. As you rightly say, this sentence is taken out of context from a 70-minute speech. What I wanted to say very clearly is that there are individuals in the world today who, in the name of this religion, distort it while claiming to defend the religion, who kill, murder, slit throats and uphold a narrative justifying a form of parting from the rest of the world of human communities. And there is a violence today that is driven by extremist movements and individuals in the name of Islam. That is obviously a problem for Islam because Muslims are its main victims, I mentioned the figures, over 80%, and that is a problem for us all. All religions have experienced this type of crisis in their history.

JOURNALIST

So to put it more clearly, the crisis is not within Islam, but within Muslim society?

THE PRESIDENT

The crisis is within our societies, because we have individuals everywhere who, in the name of a religion, and often with little knowledge of it, commit the worst sometimes with the complicity of people who know the religion better or claim to know it better: acts of terrorism, acts of great violence and political agendas that are entirely at odds with our values and the capacity to live together, and there is the link from these violent extremists to terrorism. These people are a danger to our societies and this is what we are experiencing. They are a danger because Tunisia experienced these attacks first hand by these terrorists when the Bardo Museum was attacked. Algeria saw some decades ago terrible attacks by extremists in the name of this religion. Afghanistan has seen them. Today, the Sahel is seeing them and Sub-Saharan Africa and our societies are seeing them. We cannot act as if nothing were wrong. These people are not doing it in the name of anything else. So it is also for this reason that this moment we are experiencing is so important and that I wanted to speak to you. Because I believe it is absolutely vital for us all for all the world's Muslims to be extremely clear

speak to you. Because I believe it is absolutely vital for us all for all the world's Muslims to be extremely clear about this situation and help all those who want to fight against violence. Nothing justifies violence. And they should all rally behind the initiatives we need to take to fight with lucidity not only the terrorists, but those who forge ideologies that justify terrorism. And for me, there is a key element to the battle we are waging, and that is basically that an ideology has developed in the world which, by distorting a religion, has become an ideology of death. That is what violent extremism in the name of Islam is. That is what al-Qaeda did. That is what Daesh did. That is precisely what the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara groups and others are doing. All these terrorist groups also have behind them people who call themselves preachers, intellectuals and organisers, including in our societies, who sometimes make assertions that appear to border on the unacceptable, but which justify this use of violence. So we all need our red lines. And, in particular, the clear condemnation of all violence is a red line. And when I see today political or religious leaders, I'll say it again, who justify beheadings or terrorism when they consider that they have been humiliated or are offended by a drawing, those people choose their camp. Those people, at the moment of clarification we are talking about, they are no longer defending the Muslims of the world; they are defending the terrorists and justifying their acts. We all need to have this clarity together. And I say that because it also means having a message of truth to send to all the world's Muslims and a message of protection, because they are in the front line of those threatened by this. So that's what I meant by those words. There is an ideology today with women and men who basically have a death mentality and who, by twisting a religion, by distorting it, justify the crime and justify the volition to no longer live side by side.

JOURNALIST

The community of French Muslims needs calming and reassurance.

THE PRESIDENT

Absolutely, because all of this has an impact at home. Because French Muslims watch your media, which sometimes, it has to be said, give a certain image of violence and untruths are everywhere on the networks. So we all have a responsibility to calm them down. You too, that's why I'm here. It is important, your channel, your social media, because you sometimes get the impression that we are not living in the same world. Or in any case, that the spotlight is trained on just one thing. The French State knows no religion. French society welcomes them all. So all the French people should be able to practise their religion peacefully. And all the French people, irrespective of their origins and the other nationalities they may share, must absolutely respect all the laws of the French Republic. That is how it works. But I want to send a message of calm and peace, because my mission, our mission, the mission for which the French people elected me, and I believe one that is historically our country's, its underlying purpose is a mission of peace between religions, because it is a mission of knowledge, of the construction of reason. So, in a way, it doesn't concern me to know what you believe. It concerns me to know whether you respect all the laws of the French Republic. I will never accept disrespect for a law of the country for religious reasons if you live on French soil. But I do want you to be able to believe in your God, whoever he may be, in peace and quiet on our soil. So when there are sometimes acts committed against Muslims in France, I want them to know that we will be uncompromising. There are crimes. Unfortunately, all too often there are crimes committed against our fellow citizens today, whatever their religion. All too often.

JOURNALIST

Mr President, you spoke about separatism, a term that has rapidly become widespread and that everyone is talking about. We get the impression that this term stigmatises Muslims in France. And in your speech in Les Mureaux, you said, "We ourselves have built our own separatism." So the State has a responsibility?

THE PRESIDENT

Yes, I said it had a responsibility, in any case, that the policy we are conducting is to combat these violent extremists who act in the name of Islam. But that the State should also resume a policy for many children in our country who live on our soil and feel abandoned, because I see our situation clearly. When I talk about separatism, what does that mean and why does it correspond to what I described to you earlier? Because you have groups I call these violent extremists who act in the name of Islam distorting the religion, who teach and explain in associations taking advantage of all the freedoms and rights that the French Republic offers, that our country offers. They teach that you should not respect France, that you should not respect our law, that you should in some way turn your back on our laws. They teach that women are not equal to men. They teach that girls should not have the same rights as boys.

Not on our soil. I tell you very clearly, not on our soil. We believe in the Enlightenment. And female citizens have the same rights as male citizens. That is existential. So never, never, never will I accept an association, even in the name of a religion, pushing back on those rights. If someone says a girl is not equal to a boy, she will not have the same education. She will not be given the same opportunities, because it is not our law. Let the people who believe that do so elsewhere. Not on French soil. So I say, those groups that would establish their law on our soil, that would separate off a part of society, we need to combat them, very clearly, because they decide to separate themselves from others. It is not against Muslims, I repeat, it is against these violent extremists who do not want to respect our laws. Because that is the key to protecting French women and

French men, particularly those who are Muslim. Because I do not want a girl, because her parents believe in Islam, which is perfectly their right in France, to find herself taken by one of these associations and effectively ill-treated on our soil. That, I cannot accept. So when we used that word separatism, it was not at all about a religion, but against the use of certain practices in the name of a religion. Moreover, we spoke about other practices that also exist on our soil and are the product of other religions or other groups.

In addition, I said we, we have a responsibility because, when I look at the strategy used by these extremists and sometimes these terrorists, they build their entire rhetoric, their narrative, on resentment. That is to say, they explain to the Muslim world, you have not been well-treated by the West, you have been humiliated, you have been colonized, you are not well-treated in their society. First of all, I look at the facts. We have a history. I have already spoken about colonialism and the history of France on different continents. So you take a hard look at it and I know what this history is. And we have to carry through this work on reconciliation through history, the truth. Yet I am astounded to see these extremist groups' narratives thriving among a youth who has never known colonization, which sometimes in France goes back generations. And why does that work? Because there is this resentment, which is more economic and social. So I consider that we, in France, have not done all the work we need to enable all the children born or who have arrived on our soil to succeed on an equal footing. And let's not confuse two things here. This has nothing to do with religion. Very little. It often has to do with your first name, last name, your skin colour and where you live.

JOURNALIST

So the integration model in France requires improvement.

THE PRESIDENT

Yes, it requires greater collective involvement, because today we have what I would call corporatisms that block society. They affect everyone, as you know. They also affect young people in neighbourhoods which are not society's most difficult ones but who come from low-income backgrounds and are often the children of immigrants and have different skin colour. That is a fact, and I face it head-on. So we must do a lot more through our housing policy – we have already been doing this for three years, but I also want to speed that up, through our housing policies, so that this access to housing is more balanced around the country – and through our training. But we must do a lot more for employment, and the key thing in these neighbourhoods, to prevent violent extremist groups succeeding and indoctrinating people, is for us to reconnect with the republican dream, a French dream, for these young people to have the chance to find economic opportunities, for them to become champions in start-ups, for them to become champions in cinema, for them – young men and women – to become champions in the French academic world, and champions in the ecological transition. And today they are more impeded than in the rest of society. That is true.

JOURNALIST

One gets the impression that French secularism in general is ultra-sensitive to religion.

THE PRESIDENT

I sometimes get the feeling that certain religions are also ultra-sensitive to French secularism.

JOURNALIST

But by far...

THE PRESIDENT

I have still never seen anyone sentenced to death in the name of French secularism. You will grant me that distinction. But I would like everyone to be as clear as that, the red line: whoever sentences people to death or justifies a violent action is, for me, on the other side. If we are clear on that, we will already have made huge progress during this programme.

JOURNALIST

Far from violence and condemnation, one gets the impression that French secularism is sensitive about religion, and above all, Islam, certain aspects of Islam. We have been talking about the headscarf for 30 years, and the Islamic veil. People don't have the same kind of debates in Britain or many other European cities. You can see this sensitivity from a long way off. Why?

THE PRESIDENT

I am going to tell you first why it exists, what secularism is, and why there are differences with other societies. I am not saying it is better in France. I am going to try and explain to you why. Secularism is about being able to either believe or not believe without it having any consequences on your citizenship, and so secularism is a law of freedom. It is what ensures that in France you can, as I have told you, believe or not believe whatever your religion is. And I ask you to pose this critical question: a lot of countries that teach us lessons sometimes – how do they treat some of their fellow citizens of this or that religion? Do they have the same rights? Often, no. It is also a principle of the separation of Church and State, the State being neutral and not getting involved in

religions. It does not finance them, it does not regulate them, and the people who serve the State, who are civil servants, have a principle of neutrality and must not show any apparent signs they are religious when they meet everyone. And our schools, for our pupils – because we are forming consciences that are not yet adult – must allow this same neutral space, and so that is why there are no religious signs in our schools until the age of 18. There can be at university. But having said that, secularism does not mean wiping out religions. That is not true. And so in society, all religions live. And in the streets you can see headscarves, in the streets you can see people who may be wearing crosses or kippas. Sometimes these things have been confused; that is not the case in France. But there are these neutral spaces when the State is present; there is this distinction. So I repeat very clearly: in France, the principle of secularism has no problem with Islam as a religion – none. What is also a fact is that when religions were organized, Islam had a very small presence in France. Muslim civilization has this history with our country and has contributed a lot to our country for centuries and centuries. Our scholars have taken an interest in it, we have a relationship with a very strong Enlightenment Islam, but Islam was the denomination of few citizens in 1905. With the waves of migration in the 1960s and 1970s, which have continued in recent decades, Islam has grown in our country. As I was saying, the figures are never clear because we don't do religious statistics, but when I look at the analyses done by certain institutes, they say that between four and six million French people have Islam as their religion. So we have no problem with this religion, which is that of several million of our fellow citizens.

Having said that, why are things in our society not, for example, like in Britain? Because we are not what is called a multicultural country or society. It is true that the Anglo-Saxon countries and sometimes several others in Europe have built themselves very differently in relation to religions. I remind you that, for example, Britain is still a parliamentary monarchy. The monarch has a relationship with a religion which was itself, incidentally, born out of pain through the vicissitudes of the 17th century, and so the relationship with religion is not the same. The relationship of politics and religion is not the same, because it is the result of another history. But the Anglo-Saxon societies in fact have a multiculturalism which is there, which means that religions coexist. Is it a better model than ours? I won't judge that, but it is different, you are right. But I would like to say a few words about the beauty of the French model, because I believe in it very deeply. I don't believe in it in order to combat this or that religion – I want all children born in, or arriving on the soil of our country to live happily and in harmony – but because I think there is something unique about France's ambition, namely the idea that ultimately we can have the same representation of the world because we are citizens of the same country, because we – men and women – are citizens of the same country. And it is the idea of saying: "You can exercise your religion, you can believe or not believe, but we must talk and respect one another in order to share the same representation of the world – in other words, we must be able to live together in the true and profound sense of the term. We must be able to understand one another, accept other people's otherness, and build a common representation of what we are and of the rest of the world."

And so what we must all make the effort to do is recognize everyone, whatever their religion, embrace them, allow them to live in peace, and tell them: "We must engage in constant dialogue in order to build our laws together, and you cannot avoid citizenship in the name of religion, and you can never combat a religion in the name of citizenship". That is the message France sends, and at a certain point it also spread it widely in the Middle East and on the African continent. I think we must not forget this message, because when I look at the madness and brutality of the world we are living in, it is also linked today to the fact that people in the same country no longer want to create laws together, no longer have the same representation of the world together, even if it is created through imperfect mediation. They simply want their religion to prevail over another, their representation of the world to prevail over another, and that is why I say, really with a lot of humility and friendship in the true sense of the term for all Muslims: don't be mistaken about what freedom of expression in France is. In no circumstances is it something created to get at you or harm you, but help me defend it, firstly because sometimes, in your countries, you have had this freedom. Maybe you have forgotten what it feels like. There is nothing more beautiful. But help me defend it, because it is the condition for our being able to live together. Otherwise we can live only in opposition to one another. I am not saying people are perfect, I am not saying what hurt you was innocent, but the fact that it can be done is important. And what we must now understand is why it hurt people and try to reduce this lack of understanding. But I believe very deeply that what is currently happening is more than misinterpretation. I think that France, through its values, because it tries to... The battle it is currently fighting, which we are currently fighting, holds within it the chance to build a model for the future – that of living together as citizens of a country, whatever our religions.

JOURNALIST

We are now going to jump to questions about international relations with Turkey. What is happening with Turkey, that country which is sometimes an ally and sometimes never on the same wavelength? On Syria and Libya, there are many differences at the moment. Where are relations heading?

THE PRESIDENT

I want to say that a lot depends on President Erdoğan. I personally adhere to the principles I have just set out. I believe in friendship and respect. I have never insulted any world leader. Never. I respect the president the Turkish people have elected for themselves and I stand at Turkey's side. At the time of speaking, a terrible earthquake has hit Turkey and so I also want to offer my condolences to the Turkish people and I also want to

earthquake hit Turkey, and so I also want to offer my condolences to the Turkish people and I also want to say that we immediately proposed that our emergency services which deal with natural disasters go and assist the people. Turkey is a great nation; moreover, it is a great nation of knowledge, understanding and openness, with which we have university, academic and historic ties. A great nation which has sometimes also been able to draw inspiration from our history. What is happening today? I note that Turkey has vague imperialist tendencies in the region and I don't think these are a good thing for the region's stability; there you are. What happened in Syria, I think, was a surprise and an act of aggression for many allies. The United States of America was on the ground, as were we – we were in the region, we had aircraft there as part of the international coalition. And let me reiterate, we fought Daesh in Syria with the Syrian Democratic Forces and the Kurdish fighters, hugely courageous men and women fighters. The war was being won against the territorial caliphate; what did Turkey do? It invaded Syria, not respecting any sovereignty, in order to fight, and fight those who were our then allies?. In Libya, I regret the fact that the Berlin Conference commitments were not honoured. In Berlin, all of us around the table said we had to enforce the weapons embargo and allow no foreign fighters to set foot on Libyan soil. On several occasions we showed that several countries, including Turkey, violated that embargo. Turkey is not the only one, but it did it. I believe these two examples alone demonstrate that Turkey today is displaying belligerent behaviour with the NATO allies. Secondly, Turkey's actions in the eastern Mediterranean were deeply aggressive towards Cyprus and Greece. Those two countries are European. We support Europe's sovereignty. I am recalling all this to give you an explanation, but I have never done so in an aggressive way towards Turkey or its leader. But I do not think that we can accept the existing situation, the Turkish President's current strategy. So I believe that when you are allies, when you are friends, you have to speak the truth about things and say where your lines are. What is our wish now? That things calm down, that Turkey – the Turkish President – respects France, respects the European Union, respects its values and doesn't tell lies or heap insults. That would be wonderful and I think it is the absolute minimum. Secondly, that the Turkish President, truly worthy of his country's history, ceases the unilateral actions he has been carrying out against several European countries. That is what I am saying. And what is our wish if I were to ignore all that? Obviously I believe in peace, so it is more a case of us restarting peaceful relations and academic, university, cultural and economic cooperation. But the precondition for these relations, all the same, is to get back to a sense of friendship, decency and the clarification I was talking about. We are not at that point today. Over the past few weeks, it has been more a case of us going into reverse. On this I would also like to say, with regard to your point, that this is not a French position but a European position. Yesterday we held a European Council at which the 27 members were unanimous in supporting France, and yesterday President Charles Michel very clearly supported France over the attacks it is facing today and he also reminded Turkey of its duties.

JOURNALIST

Last question, Mr President.

JOURNALIST

There's a cornerstone of both worlds' civilizations, the Rosetta Stone, 1799, discovered by Jean-François Champollion. How can this model of cultural relations be strengthened in the future?

THE PRESIDENT

You know...

JOURNALIST

It is my last question.

THE PRESIDENT

No, thank you for ending, precisely, with these ties of civilization and understanding. How should it be strengthened? By strengthening mutual understanding. As I have said, in the policy I intend to carry out, we are going to invest in our higher education and our academic and cultural research and set up chairs again at French universities focusing on the Maghreb, the Middle East and Muslim civilization. I would also like us to increase partnerships; I have forged many since I became President. But we all need a better knowledge of our civilizations. And so I think the time of the Rosetta Stone is over, along, moreover with what there is of that story. But you are right to mention it; many other examples could be called to mind. But I think the path we have to take today is that of understanding, reason, scientific and academic cooperation and education. A lack of understanding fuels fear. Ignorance fuels hatred. And the tyrants of the world perpetuate this. So in the long run the most effective weapon against tyrants, against these extremists is knowledge, understanding and knowing the other's face, with all its rough edges, its features. It is about the ability to look at how the other's face differs from mine; at how our civilizations, how we as men and women differ; it is very important. So I think that this history has to continue, and we are going to ensure this by investing in understanding our civilizations, by setting up academic chairs in Middle Eastern and Arab countries on Muslim civilization obviously, but also European civilization, the Enlightenment, French philosophy and French culture, to develop academic chairs in France so that there is a greater understanding of Muslim civilization, and allow academic debate. Because when debate occurs between learned women and men, fighting stops between ignorant women and men. And everyone can be educated. I believe in this deeply, I believe in knowledge, mutual respect and understanding. But let us be very clear: we shall have to wage some very arduous battles in the period ahead,

difficult because today some people have chosen the worst. And in this battle against ignorance, in this battle which is one of hatred, I shall need every woman and man of goodwill, whatever their religion.

JOURNALIST

Mr President, shukran ["thank you" in Arabic], thank you for agreeing to answer our questions, particularly as it coincides with Al Jazeera's 24th birthday.

THE PRESIDENT

Happy birthday!

JOURNALIST

Thank you, Mr President. Shukran.