

Speech by President Emmanuel Macron on the situation in Afghanistan

My dear fellow citizens in France, its Overseas Departments and abroad, I am speaking to you this evening as we continue to resolutely battle the virus and are doing everything in our power to ensure that the economic and social recovery is as strong as possible in our country, because a few thousand kilometers away, a historic shift is occurring in Afghanistan – far from our borders but with major repercussions for the entire international community, for Europe and for France.

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After a war lasting 20 years, following the decision taken first by President Trump and then by President Biden to withdraw American troops, Kabul, the capital of Afghanistan, fell within a few hours to the Taliban, without resistance.

The American and international intervention began exactly 20 years ago, following the attacks of September 11, 2001, and the refusal of the Taliban regime that then held power in Afghanistan to turn over Bin Laden, the organizer of those attacks.

For 13 years, from 2001 to 2014, our country was engaged militarily in Afghanistan.

In October 2001, President Jacques Chirac decided that France would take part in the international effort out of solidarity with our American friends and allies who had just experienced a horrific attack on their soil. With a clear goal: to fight the terrorist threat that was directly targeting our territory and that of our allies from Afghanistan, which had become a haven for Islamist terrorism.

In June 2011, President Nicolas Sarkozy began an initial drawdown of French troops.

President François Hollande then decided to completely withdraw our combat troops in coordination with the then-Afghan authorities and our allies. The French military intervention thus definitively gave way, on December 31, 2014, to the civilian effort that we continued to undertake for the Afghan people, with whom our ties of friendship are deep and longstanding.

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Our fight in Afghanistan was just, and our engagement there was to our credit. France has only ever had one enemy: terrorism. Our military interventions are not intended to replace national sovereignty or to impose democracy from outside, but rather to defend international stability and our security. The establishment of credible political processes is our priority in every instance. It was this fundamental principle of our foreign policy that we applied in Afghanistan and that we are continuing to apply.

A large number of French army units passed through those valleys during those 13 years: Legionnaires, riflemen, servicemen, Alpine chasseurs, marines, airmen. And it is to them that I want to speak first this evening. To those who fought, to the families of those who died or who were seriously wounded – we will not forget our soldiers. We will not forget our dead. Ninety in total.

On August 18, 2008 – 13 years ago almost to the day – 10 French troops and an Afghan interpreter were killed and 21 French troops were wounded in the Uzbin Valley ambush.

France's fight served a purpose and did us credit. One day it will bear fruit, and I ask you to remember that.

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At this very moment, the situation in Afghanistan is deteriorating swiftly and sharply. As I speak, the Taliban have assumed control of nearly the entire country. They entered Kabul and control the city with the exception of the airport, where activities are being coordinated by the Americans. The Afghan president left the country. Commercial flights have ceased.

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This shift, which we were prepared for, calls for immediate decisions and initiatives on a par with the gravity of the situation, in order to respond to the humanitarian disaster.

The absolute priority is to ensure the security of our compatriots, who must all leave the country, as well as Afghans who have worked for France.

Our citizens have been evacuated in stages during recent weeks, in anticipation of what would happen. We are in contact with all French citizens who wish to return home, whether they be at the military airport, the civilian airport, or on the historic grounds of the Embassy, where the situation remains troubling. I want to take this opportunity to thank our representatives on the ground – our diplomats, police officers, and military personnel – for their commitment and their courage. I also want to thank our American allies, who have been indispensable to carrying out these evacuations.

France is one of the very few countries that decided it had to have the means on the ground until the very end to protect those who worked for us. In recent weeks, we also made plans for evacuations operations.

We were therefore able to welcome all Afghan employees of French entities in Afghanistan who could be in danger, together with their families – more than 600 people – and assume care for them under good conditions.

France is currently protecting the European Union delegate and has provided protection for Afghans who work with the European delegation. France has also provided protection and support for all French personnel of nongovernmental organizations who wish to leave the country.

Operations have been under way for several years now to welcome Afghan civilian personnel employed by the French armed forces, along with their families. Our duty and our sense of integrity demand that we protect those who help us: interpreters, drivers, cooks, and so many others. More than 800 people are now on French soil. Several dozen people who assisted the French armed forces are still on the ground, and we are mobilizing all of our efforts on their behalf.

Many Afghans – rights workers, artists, journalists, activists – are now in danger because of their activities. We will help them as much as we possibly can, because it does credit to France to stand by those who share our values, taking into account necessary adjustments to our capacity. I want to thank the associations, collectives and local governments who will help welcome them. In order to proceed with their evacuation, which can only be conducted in close coordination with American troops on the ground, I have decided to send two military aircraft and special forces. They will be on the ground in the coming hours.

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Apart from these urgent measures, I intend to take several initiatives on behalf of France in close coordination with the other European nations and our allies.

- We will continue to focus our efforts first and foremost on actively combating Islamist terrorism in all of its forms.

Terrorist groups are present in Afghanistan and will seek to take advantage of the destabilization. The UN Security Council will therefore have to present a responsible, united response. I addressed this point with Prime Minister Johnson and we will take joint initiatives in the coming hours. The restoration of stability will demand this sort of political and diplomatic action within the Security Council. Afghanistan must not again become the terrorist haven that it once was. This is crucial to peace and international stability, in the face of a common enemy: terrorism and those who support it. In this regard, we will also do everything we can to help Russia, the United States and Europe to cooperate effectively, because we share the same interests.

- The destabilization of Afghanistan will likely also increase the flow of irregular migration to Europe. France, as I have said, is and will continue doing its duty to protect those who are in the greatest danger. We will fully participate in an organized, just international effort. But in the days to come, Afghanistan will also need its vital forces, and Europe alone will not be able to assume the consequences of the current situation. We must plan and protect ourselves against large irregular migratory flows that endanger those who are part of them and fuel trafficking of every kind.

In conjunction with the Federal Republic of Germany – and I spoke about this with Chancellor Merkel just a few minutes ago – and other European states, we will therefore put forward an initiative to immediately implement a robust, coordinated and united response to combat irregular flows, to promote an effort characterized by solidarity and unified protective criteria, and establish cooperation with transit and host countries such as Pakistan, Turkey and Iran.

- Finally, we must continue to defend our principles, our values, which make us what we are.

The history of Afghanistan did not begin in 2001. We intervened in a country shattered by 40 years of war, a great country in upheaval.

And we French can understand this. It took us centuries of fighting, of mistakes, of progress and reversals to build a nation that embodies the greatest human hopes: equality regardless of origin, gender or religion and the freedoms of choice and conscience.

And we know that these battles must be waged anew each day.

The challenges facing Afghan men and women in the coming weeks and months will be terrible, enormous.

The Afghan people have the right to live in security, with respect for all. Afghan women have the right to live in freedom and dignity. Afghanistan's future is in its own hands, but we will continue to stand with Afghan men and women in a spirit of comradeship – by supporting Afghan civil society and doing our duty to protect those whom we can protect; by saying very clearly to those who choose war, obscurantism and blind violence that they are choosing isolation; by always standing with those who fight for freedom and women's rights, who send the world the same message that we do. That is the choice of reason, the choice of who we are at our core.

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Vive la République.

Vive la France.