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PRESS CONFERENCE GIVEN BY PRESIDENT EMMANUEL MACRON FROM BAGHDAD

Minister,
Members of Parliament,
Ambassadors,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am meeting you again for this press briefing following the conference we have just held – the Baghdad Conference for Cooperation and Partnership – after bilateral meetings with the President and Prime Minister, and my discussions with several counterparts present at the conference, including President Sissi, the Prime Minister of Kuwait, the Emir of Qatar and other officials here. After this we will continue this round of visits, meeting the President of the Parliament – I will come back to this – and continue with further events today and tomorrow.

The first point I wanted to come back to is our bilateral relationship and the purpose of this conference. What we want, and this emerged from the discussions we have been having with President Saleh for two years now, is to help Iraq genuinely build its future and so work both on the fight against terrorism and regional stability. Indeed, over the past few decades Iraq has seen conflicts and multiple instances of destabilization. But, very clearly, these past years have been marked by both the war against Daesh and external destabilization by several neighbours and militias which have contributed to weakening the Government. Iraq's peace and stability can be conceived only within an agenda of regional stability. So this conference's prime objective was to address these Iraqi difficulties, and it has come in a geopolitical context, familiar to us all, of a reconfiguration of both regional and international forces, demonstrating, I believe, that today Iraq has been able to establish an unprecedented forum of discussion, allowing the region's powers, which were no longer talking to each other, or were not talking to each other at the time, to work together on this essential issue. That is for me the most important feature of the conference we just held.

In this respect I restated, as regards the fight against terrorism, in which, as you know, France has been engaged for several years, alongside Iraqi men and women in the Global Coalition. This battle has been fought with great courage by men and women in Iraq. I want to repeat this here and again pay tribute to them, and I will do so again tomorrow when I meet several families of Peshmerga fighters. I think this is something we must not forget at this time. But we remain committed, because while we have defeated the regional caliphate, the battle against Islamist terrorism is not over. In this respect, I have made it very clear that France remains and will remain committed within in the Global Coalition so long as the Iraqi government wishes it to do so and Iraq's security depends on it, and, to make this absolutely clear, this applies regardless of what our allies choose to do. As you know, France is contributing over 800 soldiers in the region to the Global Coalition and the fight against Daesh, in two main locations. Firstly, Iraq and particularly Erbil, and tomorrow I will visit our special forces in Camp Grenier, named in honour of our soldier who died in autumn 2017; and second, the H5 base in Jordan with our air force, as well as many other additional forces, including from our base in the United Arab Emirates. This is the first pillar I was talking about to which France has recommitted, and I believe that today's conference has shown that this too is very important: the commitment of all, and I mean all, parties involved in pursuing the fight against terrorism.

The second element is securing stability by safeguarding Iraqi sovereignty. As you know, the militias are very active on Iraqi soil. There have been several incursions into the north of the country also linked to terrorist activities perpetrated against Turkey from Iraqi soil. There are today very clearly multiple incursions undermining this sovereignty. What we want, both in a bilateral framework and through this conference, is both to strengthen the Iraqi Government's ability to continue to cooperate by increasing investment and training the Iraqi forces, and, through discussions, exchanges – and this was also one of the important purposes of this conference – to get the principal neighbours to commit to reducing interference and precisely to cooperating more with the Iraqi forces.

The third element we mentioned in the context of this agenda for stability and development in Iraq is obviously the economic issue. Counter-terrorism, stability and sovereignty, and then progress, if I may say so, and economic development, because we know we can achieve long-term stability only if there is real progress. So

progress, first of all, as regards those who have been displaced. There are many of them. I would like to reiterate our commitment – and welcome that of the Iraqi government in this regard – to all the displaced communities, in particular the Yazidi community, 200,000 of whom are still displaced. In this regard, I welcome the presence of Nobel Peace Prize laureate Nadia Murad, in our delegation and with us here; her commitment is valuable. Sinjar remains a genuine victim of the continuing destabilization and conflicts, and in insecurity because the region is a victim of both the terrorist activity perpetrated by certain groups and bombing by the Turkish armed forces. So there is a requirement both for stabilization and also economic development and sustainability. I will have the opportunity to repeat this later to Nadia Murad, and we will continue to work with the Yazidis; we have invested a lot in health and education in line with our commitments in this field. I want to say here that we will continue to remain committed on all these issues alongside the Yazidis. This is an important component of the development strategy I mentioned earlier, with financial commitments which I will be clarifying, and in particular the construction of the hospital in Sinjar, where we remain collectively mobilized to support all the displaced people in the strategy I was talking about.

This strategy of progress and economic development is also essential in a context where Iraq continues to grow demographically, and I reminded you this morning that every year over 500,000 young Iraqis enter the job market. So there is a need for economic projects, to help the country's development. This is obviously central to our bilateral relationship, through energy, transport and development projects, which we discussed again, and water treatment projects in which French companies are very strongly involved. That is also at the heart of the regional agenda we have developed at this conference, which aims not just to identify major structuring projects in terms of infrastructure which will enable us, especially on the Baghdad-Aqaba axis – which we talked about several times this morning – to have water, energy and rail infrastructure projects which are extremely important too.

As you can see, the aim of this international conference was really to hammer home a simple message: neither interference nor indifference, but a clear commitment from the whole region and from France to help Iraq to be fully stable, sovereign and at peace, and to ensure development for its population and in particular its young people. All this supports President Saleh's efforts and the reformist momentum of the Kazimi government, which I would like to commend here. Courageous reforms have been undertaken, the electoral process is also being carried out with great courage and confirmation given of the scheduling of elections on 10 October this year, which is also a very important point for us and which, I think I can say, has allowed the launch of this conference in the best possible conditions.

Those are the points I wanted briefly to bring to your attention after these initial stages. As I was saying, in a few moments we're going to go to the Parliament because I am accompanied by an eminent parliamentary delegation – and I thank the large number of our French members of Parliament for coming in force – and because Parliament is going to have an extremely important role to play by giving a legal framework to this cooperation and continuing the work that has been set in train.

For me, this visit is also devoted to the bilateral relationship with Iraq and we have built a partnership which, obviously, includes the fight against terrorism, stabilization efforts, the regional agenda and many important projects, but is also an opportunity, with the cultural, intellectual and religious delegation accompanying me, to meet all diverse sections of the Iraqi people. I believe this reflects the very history of France. We have a long history with Iraq and I would like to pay tribute to the commitment we have had for a long time, from the different communities, and particularly what is being done for the Christian communities and Christians of the East. I welcome the presence of Monsignor Gollnisch with us here. This is also what underpinned Danielle Mitterrand's historic engagement through her foundation and the role she played with regard to the Kurdish people. It underpins our intellectual, cultural and educational action. Mr Personnaz is leading a mission on the Minister for Europe and Foreign Affairs' behalf and we are developing this cooperation with schools and religious communities. We have been able to carry out some useful action here and will continue doing so. The ALIPH Foundation has undertaken some extremely important work and I pay tribute here to its President and General Delegate who are doing some extremely important work and have contributed to restoring a number of cultural and religious monuments in Iraq, in partnership with the Agence Française de Développement (AFD) and UNESCO; and, for several years, the Arab World Institute has been carrying out highly structuring work with and for the Iraqi people in all their diversity.

With the Prime Minister I will shortly be visiting the Al-Kadhimiya Mosque, a Shiite shrine and place of study. It is a mark of respect and recognition for all Shiites, and I believe it is also a first for a French President. Later this evening I will be going to Erbil, so I can be with our troops tomorrow morning. But I will be in Mosul tomorrow. Mosul, which still bears the scars of Daesh's crimes. I will be taking its inhabitants messages and gestures of solidarity. I will meet the representatives of the Christian communities. We will also make important commitments, including to help restore several important sites, and I will be announcing this tomorrow. I will also have the chance to go back to the Sunni community, and after that I will also meet the Kurdish authorities and Kurdish fighters, as I mentioned, to express France's solidarity and support to them, like the support I expressed earlier to the Yazidis. So you see, this round of visits, if I may say so, is also designed to recognise

the richness and all sections of the Iraqi people that we will devote the next stages of these visits following this conference. I will now answer your questions.

Journalist

Good morning, Mr President. I have two questions. One about the conference: we listened to the speeches, the statements by all sides, generally rather polite, we heard the Iranian speak in Arabic, so there was a lot of good will, but will there be a follow-up mechanism for the decisions adopted? Perhaps you can also tell us whether this politeness remained polite afterwards, behind closed doors, or whether there were perhaps a few more "acrimonious" exchanges or something of that nature? Then my second question: you said this morning, and repeated just now, that France was not making its decision to stay in Iraq dependent on another American decision. Does this mean that in the event of a US withdrawal at the end of the year, whatever the American decision, France pledges to keep a military presence in Iraq? And from an operational point of view, do we have the means to stay in Iraq without US cover?

Emmanuel Macron

So on your first point, you are right to say that the tone definitely aimed to appease. I think this is also linked first to the work we have been doing for a year, since we had almost held this conference with the President and the Prime Minister a year ago. Iraq and France have worked hard to approach and engage with all the stakeholders. I think too that there has been a realization by all the powers in the region that the contemporary context requires them to re-engage in discussions and cooperate. Does this mean that all the differences or disagreements are disappearing? No. But the collective choice was made not to address them in a way which I would say was too direct or brutal, so this was not the case in private either. It was the same during the private conversations and the lunch we had afterwards. It was deliberate because the desire was genuinely to create this unprecedented format – where, for the first time, I think, in a very long time, you had foreign ministers from Saudi Arabia and Iran around the table talking and discussing the same issue – and to try and continue this.

So it was to do this that we began by issuing and approving a decision in which the terms of counter-terrorism, stability and the fight against interference are explicitly set out in writing, but we also introduced a follow-up process to this conference, through which we will have delegates who are going to work together, firstly to ensure that the commitments made are actually honoured, and secondly to go further in identifying projects and the needs for financing and mobilizing international donors. We agreed there would be regular meetings, one probably at ministerial level every three to six months, and one at Head of State and Government level within 10 to 12 months, and we also decided that the follow-up could take place in Aqaba.

As for our forces and our efforts here, as I said, the French presence in Iraq is, firstly, respectful of Iraqi sovereignty. Since day one, we have acted only at the request and with the consent of the Iraqi authorities, and within the framework of the Global Coalition, with a single and simple objective: to fight terrorism. Whatever the US decides, we will maintain our presence to fight terrorism in Iraq, so long as the terrorist groups continue to operate and the Iraqi government asks us for this support. These are our only two conditions. Thanks to the studies we have conducted, I can tell you that we have the operational capabilities to ensure this presence, whatever the US does. We will adapt our mechanisms because France always follows the same line: we fight Islamist terrorism. That is our commitment in the Sahel, that is our commitment here. With a never-changing grammar of international affairs: we are doing this in support of States, at their request and with requirements of these States. That is the framework in which we are acting here too.

Journalist

On Afghanistan, there was a first contact yesterday between France and the Taliban. Have they committed themselves to continuing the evacuations? Are these evacuations the sine qua non for a possible dialogue with them? Furthermore, you met the Emir of Qatar earlier today. What did you say to each other? How can Qatar help France continue these evacuations of Afghans?

Emmanuel Macron

Qatar has been playing an important role for several months, at the request of the Americans and the previous Administration, in conducting, hosting and then participating in negotiations with the Taliban. In this context, I would like to pay tribute to the role of the Emir of Qatar and all his diplomats, who have made very thorough efforts and who, particularly in our current situation, are playing an extremely important and useful role. As you know, our US allies are in the process, in line with the commitments they made with the Taliban, of closing the military airport through which we have been conducting evacuation operations since mid-August and which has enabled the evacuation of 2,800 French, European and Afghan nationals, the overwhelming majority of them Afghans, whom we wanted to protect or repatriate; and we ourselves ended these operations yesterday. We are conducting discussions, which are still fragile and very provisional, which is why I will be extremely cautious in my answer to you. But yes, discussions have begun with the Taliban on humanitarian operations and the ability to protect and repatriate Afghans at risk.

Secondly, yes, we are working jointly with Qatar, among others, to enable these operations to take place because, in the framework of their discussions with the Taliban, Qatar has the possibility – I am still speaking in the conditional – perhaps of arranging airlift operations, or in any case re-opening certain air routes under security conditions still to be defined. That is why I remain very cautious, but it could allow evacuation

security conditions can be defined. That is why it remains very delicate, but it could allow evacuation operations in an inevitably different framework, which has to be systematically negotiated with the Taliban, and in particular with Taliban security operations.

As far as we are concerned, and to be very clear about this because I know there is a lot of anxiety in many families, we have, concerning all the Afghan men and women who have been reported to us and appear to be eligible for the asylum procedure – and in any case need protection because of who they are, of the fight they are waging – and for whom we have the requisite contact information, issued the required documentation and certificates. Several hundred of them have already got their visas, but were unable to reach the airport. We evacuated over 2,200 in the critical period, but there are still many hundreds on-site. So, in the days, weeks or months to come, our aim, through this cooperation with Qatar, and in the framework of discussions with the Taliban, is to be able to carry out targeted evacuation operations to protect these men and women whom we have identified and to whom we have given these provisional visas. This, very clearly, is a condition for us for any form of political engagement and therefore, in the long run, a procedure which would commit France as well as our allies with regard to the Taliban. I have said this several times. There are important lists that have been negotiated, that have been taken from G7 communiqués and others.

But for me, the essential prerequisites for discussing the future and having some elements of recognition or political commitment are, first, that the Taliban absolutely respect humanitarian law and the protection of Afghan men and women who wish to leave and enjoy this protection and in particular constitutional asylum. For artists, intellectuals, journalists, judges, many women, this is essential. This is the first condition. The second condition is to honour a clear commitment and a red line when it comes to all terrorist groups, and for this to be clearly verifiable. The third is respect for human rights and particularly for the dignity and rights of women. These issues are crucial and we want to have coordinated action, which is what we decided at the G7. This is what we are now deciding with our partners. I have had this discussion with all the partners in the region who also wish to coordinate with us in the political management of a phase which is inevitably going to be chaotic and extremely destabilizing, but in which we must stick to certain firm principles.

Let me give you some very specific figures on evacuations: I have reminded you of these several times, but I want to set it all out again here. As you know, France, which has not been militarily involved since the end of 2014, had already evacuated and protected over 830 French armed forces auxiliaries, plus families, in the period preceding the crisis we have just experienced. We did this over time, calmly, by going to see all those who presented themselves, checking their documentation and protecting their families. Then, under the right to asylum, we have constantly worked and done our duty, as France has received applications from tens of thousands of Afghan men and women in recent years. On average, 10,000 per year have applied, and France has one of Europe's highest protection rates: 89%, much higher than other European countries. These are the Afghan men and women who have come to us for asylum. Third element: before the crisis peaked in the middle of August, we evacuated all our local staff and their families to protect them, around 630 people. We did this last spring. We have sometimes been criticized by people saying: "You see things too pessimistically". I am happy to have been clear-sighted rather than pessimistic. In addition to these emergency operations, we have protected all our embassy staff and nationals. Since the crisis peaked, we have evacuated exactly 2,834 people from Afghanistan, including 142 French nationals, 17 other Europeans and, as you can see, over 2,600 Afghans, to give very specific figures, with some 15 flights from the United Arab Emirates since 17 August. This has been possible thanks to the commitment of our diplomats, to the Foreign Ministry's crisis centre, which I would like to thank, since its head is at the Minister's side today and will imminently be taking on the responsibility for French diplomacy here. This gives me the opportunity to commend all the teams at the crisis centre and obviously those present in Kabul: the ambassador, his staff, as well as our military and our police.

Journalist

Mr President, tomorrow, as you mentioned, you will be in Mosul, a city which was long held by Daesh. What message will you bring, especially when you visit the site of the al-Nuri mosque where Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi declared himself "caliph" of the "Islamic State"? And secondly, you were talking a little earlier about the different sections of the Iraqi people, what is your message for the Christians of the East here? Yesterday, in Baghdad, we met some Dominicans who cannot really see how the Christians of the East, even after the reconstruction, could again find a place in Iraqi society. Thank you.

Emmanuel Macron

Indeed, I think that is precisely one of the challenges: finding a way for all the components of Iraqi society to find their place again, as you say. I think too that our presence, our commitment, is precisely this. The same thread guides our friendly, even, affectionate commitment to Lebanon. There are a few countries in the region that, through their history, embody this pluralism. France's aim is to defend it, because it is the very condition for the region's stability because it respects its history and is why we have always been committed to supporting not just the Christians of the East, but also all minorities, all communities.

So, as you reminded us, tomorrow I will be in Mosul's Old City, at the foot of the Al-Nouri Mosque, whose initial construction dates back almost a thousand years and whose recent history has scarred the country's life with a great deal of cruelty, in particular the presence of Daesh. So on this point, I simply want to say that the message I will bring is the need for a return of sovereignty, and not just for normality, but also for culture and the possibility of worshipping peacefully, because the international community has worked on this site. The renovation of these places is a priority for us and France is engaged in it. We are doing this within UNESCO,

and moreover, I want to commend the "Reviving the Spirit of Mosul" project launched by UNESCO. We are also supporting the work carried out by ALIPH, which is collaborating with the Louvre Museum on renovating the neighbouring Mosul Museum, on which we are working. The message we will bring is one of rebuilding in every sense of the word, a commitment by France and the international community to repair what has been done by some who have twisted a religion, distorted it, twisted it to promote a project of obscurantism, crimes, of which the Iraqis, the Iraqi Muslims, were the first victims.

Then, because we will also meet the Dominicans tomorrow, we will obviously discuss France's role as regards the Christians of the East, in Iraq in particular, but also more widely throughout the region. As I said, this message is not purely civilizational, but also geopolitical. There can be no balance without respect for these communities. Iraq will not remain Iraq without the possibility for... We will be on the site of Our Lady of the Hour Church, but all the Christian communities say they can worship in peace and continue doing so. I will thus have the opportunity, at that time, to pay tribute to the communities' admirable work in the educational, medical and social fields for the whole population, not just for Christians. This commitment is always a commitment to peace and peaceful coexistence that must be safeguarded. In this respect, France is supporting this effort and I will say this again, in the framework of the Minorities Fund. Since 2017, France has provided funds totalling 6 million euros for various projects supporting Iraqi Christians in the social and medical fields. We also fund school projects, as I mentioned earlier, to disseminate not just the French language and culture, but also its values of peace and peaceful coexistence in the region. The Fund supporting Eastern schools, which I announced in Jerusalem in January 2020, provides financial support for three schools in Iraq. I will recall tomorrow that I have asked for more to be done in the coming months, we have discussed this with Monsignor Gollnisch and Minister Le Drian, and we will step up the effort. Subsequently, we will also announce very concrete investments by France and ALIPH for the future house of prayer and the restoration works. So this is a resistance effort in the dark times we are living in. But this resistance effort is essential and supported by France, not just through concrete projects, but also by the way we operate, i.e. regarding governments and the whole region, where we constantly protect and defend all these communities and in particular the Christians of the East.