

In the Name of God, the Most Merciful, the Most Kind

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**Afghan Women Do not Want to Backtrack**

Despite all social and cultural barriers, Afghan women have made great strides in the post-Taliban administration. They played an active role in advocating their rights and freedoms and ending sexual discrimination, which still holds strong sway across the country, mainly in the tribal belts.

Although gender discrimination has no room in Afghan Constitution, which officially recognizes the United Nations Charter and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, it is still exercised in Afghan community and violence against women is reported frequently. Women still encounter cultural obstacles. However, it is believed that with the public campaign against gender discrimination, in which women played a key role, and women's participation in social, political, cultural, and economic spheres, the level of negative sensitivity towards women has decreased to a great extent. Unlike the past, the public have accepted the undeniably significant role of women in the community.

In large cities, Afghan women barely encounter any cultural obstacles to hamper them from social, political, or economic activities. For example, women study and teach at schools and universities, work in cultural institutions and government administrations, engage in business, work as journalists and civil activists, and they are judges, MPs, ministers, ambassadors, governors, members of High Peace Councils and civil society, etc.

Including the judicial systems and Afghan constitution, there have been many legal and social institutions advocating the rights and freedoms of women. The Independent Human Rights Commission, established following the Bonn Conference, played a very essential role in women's rights advocacy. Afghan women now value their achievements and seek not to backtrack at any costs.

Despite all the aforementioned issues, women also suffered violence. In a radical attitude, women's rights are tailored by personal taste and then colored with a religious brush. In other words, religious extremists impose their own ideas on religion regarding women's rights and then practice upon their self-styled methods. Their interpretations are sheer stereotype. The Taliban and members of the self-proclaimed Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) treat women out of bias, carnal desire and ignorance, though their ill-mannered treatment has nothing to do with religion. Afghan women suffered seriously under the Taliban. Claiming to establish Islamic caliphate, the Taliban trampled upon the rights and dignity of women to a great extent. They were subject to men's desire and as malleable to their husbands as slaves to their masters. Taking part in social, cultural and political activities was taboo for women. In areas under their control, the Taliban issued edicts which forbade women from being educated; girls were forced to leave schools and colleges. Those who wished to leave their home to go shopping had to be accompanied by a male relative, and were required to wear the burqa. Those who appeared to disobey were publicly beaten.

In 2001, Laura Bush in a radio address condemned the Taliban's brutality to women. She still seeks to uphold the rights of Afghan women, at least by words. Her concerns reflected in her words are appreciable and have to be taken seriously. For continuing their social and political activities, Afghan women need a secure and violent-free society.

Although there are still some barriers ahead of women's progress and their rights and freedoms are still at stake, the nascent democracy led to great changes. On the basis of the Constitution, which was approved in 2004, men and women are equal before the law and have the same rights and responsibilities. Constitutionally, discriminating women on the basis of her sex is not acceptable. Moreover, unlike the traditional customs, "crime is a personal act" and girls are not supposed to sacrifice their lives, such as being exchanged as blood-money, for a crime committed by their brothers (in tribal belt, it was rife that when a boy raped a girl, his sister had to marry a man of the victim's family). Additionally, desert court is forbidden based on article 27 which states, "No one shall be punished without the decision of an authoritative court taken in accordance with the provisions of the law, promulgated prior to commitment of the offense."

It is feared that with the withdrawal of US forces and return of the Taliban in Afghanistan, Afghan women would backtrack and again fall victim to violence and radical attitude, which were exercised during the Taliban's regime. Since there is lack of trust between Afghans and the Taliban, the international community has to observe the agreement and ensure it not to be violated in case of being signed between the Taliban and the US delegates.

**Renewing Europe**

By: Emmanuel Macron

Never, since World War II, has Europe been as essential. Yet never has Europe been in so much danger.

Brexit stands as the symbol of that. It symbolises the crisis of Europe, which has failed to respond to its peoples' needs for protection from the major shocks of the modern world. It also symbolises the European trap. That trap is not one of being part of the European Union. The trap is in the lie and the irresponsibility that can destroy it.

Who told the British people the truth about their post-Brexit future? Who spoke to them about losing access to the European market? Who mentioned the risks to peace in Ireland of restoring the former border? Nationalist retrenchment offers nothing; it is rejection without an alternative. And this trap threatens the whole of Europe: the anger mongers, backed by fake news, promise anything and everything.

We have to stand firm, proud and lucid, in the face of this manipulation and say first of all what today's united Europe is. It is a historic success: the reconciliation of a devastated continent in an unprecedented project of peace, prosperity and freedom. We should never forget that. And this project continues to protect us today. What country can act on its own in the face of aggressive strategies by the major powers? Who can claim to be sovereign, on their own, in the face of the digital giants?

How would we resist the crises of financial capitalism without the euro, which is a force for the entire European Union? Europe is also those thousands of projects daily that have changed the face of our regions: the school refurbished, the road built, and the long-awaited arrival of high-speed Internet access. This struggle is a daily commitment, because Europe, like peace, can never be taken for granted. I tirelessly pursue it in the name of France to take Europe forward and defend its model. We have shown that what we were told was unattainable, the creation of a European defence capability and the protection of social rights, was in fact possible.

Yet we need to do more and sooner, because there is the other trap: the trap of the status quo and resignation. Faced with the major crises in the world, citizens so often ask us, "Where is Europe? What is Europe doing?" It has become a soulless market in their eyes.

Yet Europe is not just a market. It is a project. A market is useful, but it should not detract from the need for borders that protect and values that unite. The nationalists are misguided when they claim to defend our identity by withdrawing from Europe, because it is the European civilisation that unites, frees and protects us. But those who would change nothing are also misguided, because they deny the fears felt by our peoples, the doubts that undermine our democracies. We are at a pivotal moment for our continent, a moment when together we need to politically and culturally reinvent the shape of our civilisation in a changing world. It is the moment for European renewal. Hence, resisting the temptation of isolation and divisions, I propose we build this renewal together around three ambitions: freedom, protection and progress.

**Defend our freedom**

The European model is based on the freedom of man and the diversity of opinions and creation. Our first freedom is democratic freedom: the freedom to choose our leaders as foreign powers seek to influence our vote at each election. I propose creating a European Agency for the Protection of Democracies, which will provide each member state with European experts to protect their election processes against cyber-attacks and manipulation. In this same spirit of independence, we should also ban the funding of European political parties by foreign powers. We should have European rules banish all incitements to hate and violence from the Internet, since respect for the individual is the bedrock of our civilisation of dignity.

**Protect our continent**

Founded on internal reconciliation, the EU has forgotten to look at the realities of the world. Yet no community can create a sense of belonging if it does not have bounds that it protects. The boundary is freedom in security. We therefore need to rethink the Schengen area: all those who want to be part of it should comply with obligations of responsibility (stringent border controls) and solidarity (one asylum policy with the same acceptance and refusal rules). We will need a common border force and a European asylum office, strict control obligations and European solidarity to which each country will contribute under the authority of

a European Council for Internal Security. On the issue of migration, I believe in a Europe that protects both its values and its borders.

The same standards should apply to defence. Substantial progress has been made in the last two years, but we need to set a clear course: a treaty on defence and security should define our fundamental obligations in association with NATO and our European allies: increased defence spending, a truly operational mutual defence clause, and the European Security Council with the United Kingdom on board to prepare our collective decisions.

Our borders also need to guarantee fair competition. What power in the world would accept continued trade with those who respect none of their rules? We cannot suffer in silence. We need to reform our competition policy and reshape our trade policy with penalties or a ban in Europe on businesses that compromise our strategic interests and fundamental values such as environmental standards, data protection and fair payment of taxes; and the adoption of European preference in strategic industries and our public procurement, as our American and Chinese competitors do.

**Recover the spirit of progress**

Europe is not a second-rank power. Europe in its entirety is a vanguard: it has always defined the standards of progress. In this, it needs to drive forward a project of convergence rather than competition: Europe, where social security was created, needs to introduce a social shield for all workers, east to west and north to south, guaranteeing the same pay in the same workplace, and a minimum European wage appropriate to each country and discussed collectively every year. Getting back on track with progress also concerns spearheading the ecological cause. Will we be able to look our children in the eye if we do not also clear our climate debt? The EU needs to set its target - zero carbon by 2050 and pesticides halved by 2025 - and adapt its policies accordingly with such measures as a European Climate Bank to finance the ecological transition, a European food safety force to improve our food controls and, to counter the lobby threat, independent scientific assessment of substances hazardous to the environment and health. This imperative needs to guide all our action: from the European Central Bank to the European Commission, from the European budget to the Investment Plan for Europe. All our institutions need to have the climate as their mandate.

Progress and freedom are about being able to live from your work: Europe needs to look ahead to create jobs. This is why it needs not only to regulate the global digital giants by putting in place European supervision of the major platforms (prompt penalties for unfair competition, transparent algorithms, etc.), but also to finance innovation by giving the new European Innovation Council a budget on a par with the United States in order to spearhead new technological breakthroughs such as artificial intelligence.

A world-oriented Europe needs to look towards Africa, with which we should enter into a covenant for the future, taking the same road and ambitiously and non-defensively supporting African development with such measures as investment, academic partnerships and education for girls.

Freedom, protection and progress. We need to build European renewal on these pillars. We cannot let nationalists without solutions exploit the people's anger. We cannot sleepwalk through a diminished Europe. We cannot become ensclosed in business as usual and wishful thinking. European humanism demands action. And everywhere, the people are standing up to be part of that change. So, by the end of the year, let's set up, with the representatives of the European institutions and the member states, a Conference for Europe in order to propose all the changes our political project needs, with an open mind, even to amending the treaties. This conference will need to engage with citizens' panels and hear academics, business and labour representatives, and religious and spiritual leaders. It will define a roadmap for the EU that translates these key priorities into concrete actions. There will be disagreement, but it is better to have a static Europe or a Europe that advances, sometimes at different paces, and that is open to all?

In this Europe, the peoples will really take back control of their future. In this Europe, the United Kingdom, I am sure, will find its true place.

The Brexit impasse is a lesson for us all. We need to escape this trap and make the upcoming European Parliament elections and our project meaningful. It is for Europe's citizens to decide whether Europe and the values of progress that it embodies are to be more than just a passing episode in history. This is the choice I propose: to chart together the road to European renewal.

Emmanuel Macron is President of France.

**The Peace Agreement Appears Closer than Ever Before**

By: Mohammad Zahir Akbari

On Monday, American diplomats led by Zalmay Khalilzad, the U.S. special envoy for Afghanistan reconciliation, and a Taliban delegation, including one of the group's co-founders, began the highest-level negotiation so far in Qatar. The discussions in Doha marks the fifth time Taliban militants met with American negotiators to put an end to conflict in Afghanistan, which has lasted for about 40 years, may finally be genuine. More than 70 percent of Afghans were born in war but it seems that chances of seeing the light of peace in the country have never been greater than these days. If this dreams come true, the Afghan people will restart a warmer friendship with US because peace was and is the No. 1 priority for Afghans - no development and economic agenda has any meaning without sustainable peace and security.

President Donald Trump, in his recent State of the Union address, reiterated his administration's commitment to ending America's 17-year involvement in Afghanistan by reaching a peace settlement with the Taliban. Optimism about a breakthrough was voiced by Zalmay Khalilzad, the US peace envoy, in a tweet just hours before the latest round of talks began. According to Khalilzad, the Taliban now have a more authoritative negotiating team, particularly with the inclusion of Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar, the group's deputy leader, who traveled from Pakistan to join the talks in Qatar. Baradar's participation has increased expectations as he has long been known as a supporter of peace talks.

Hence, the US seems to show more flexibility in regard to fulfillment of Mr. Trump's peace pledges for Afghanistan. In recent days, according to US media reports, America wants to withdraw its troops from Afghanistan over the next three to five years under a new Pentagon plan. The plan, which was supposed to help talks between the US and Taliban, by halving the 14,000 current American troops, The New York Times reported. However, some Political thinkers, especial liberal, believe that weak countries such as Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iraq and Syria can be sheltered by terrorist groups in absence of United States forces. Therefore, it is stressed that until the final withdrawal, several thousand American forces has to continue strikes against Al Qaeda and the Islamic State. And after the U.S. forces withdrawal, Taliban has to ensure that Afghanistan will not harbor international terrorists, including its ally al-Qaeda and rival the Islamic State. Meantime, the US will try to arrest key al-Qaeda members, including Hamza Bin Laden, the son of Osama bin Laden, who is believed to be close to the leadership level of this group. Few days before, they announced a \$1 million prize for arrest of Hamza bin Laden.

Anyway, the plan, which has reportedly received broad acceptance in Washington and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) headquarters in Brussels, stipulates that the 8,600 European and other international troops stationed in Afghanistan would focus on training the Afghan military, shifting US forces' task to counterterrorism operations. However, Pentagon spokesman Kone

Faulkner though made it clear that no decisions have been made as peace talks were ongoing, and the US "is considering all options of force numbers and disposition", the NYT report quoted.

Generally, peace in Afghanistan is in the best interests of all countries in the region and beyond. The ongoing conflict serves no one's interests and destabilizes the entire region. A peaceful Afghanistan would offer economic opportunities for neighboring countries in the form of business, trade and serving as an energy corridor between Central and South Asia. About a week before the ongoing talks, Khalilzad met the Russian presidential envoy to Afghanistan Zamir Kabulov to discuss the contours of the Afghan peace negotiations. An inclusive intra-Afghan dialogue was agreed by both sides. The US and Russian convergence on some basic principles is a positive step and will strengthen the international consensus on peace in Afghanistan.

Besides this US-Russian consensus and support, the role of the Islamic world, particularly Saudi Arabia, is important. Last July, Jeddah hosted a conference of Muslim scholars from around the world to discuss the Afghan dilemma. The scholars pleaded for peace and stability and described the ongoing conflict as being against the principles of Islam, which stands for peace, tolerance and reconciliation. King Salman met with the participating scholars and called for an end to the suffering of the Afghan people. Jeddah's conference for Afghan peace was no ordinary event. Saudi Arabia is considered by a majority of Muslims as the leader of the Islamic world. Thus, a peace call from the Kingdom was full of meaning and an enduring message for all parties involved in the conflict.

Taliban and their supporters also seem tired of longstanding war and war expenses. In early February, the Taliban and some prominent political figures from Afghanistan, consisting mainly of the opposition, held talks in Moscow. Among the participants was former President Hamid Karzai. The Afghan government was not part of the conference and rejected the talks as having no executive authority. Although many Afghans were critical of the Moscow meeting, the move was significant politically, as it was the first time that the Taliban had sat around a table with some of the figures they had been fighting for more than a decade. Most of the delegates spoke positively of the talks and indicated that the Taliban were more inclined to a settlement than ever before.

Hence, most Afghans are optimistic about the US-led peace initiative. Any formal deal between the US and the Taliban would be an important first step and would lay the foundation for a comprehensive peace settlement. Nonetheless, not everything can be agreed unless the Afghan government becomes part of the negotiations. It is time both the Taliban and the government showed their true commitment to peace by responding to the aspirations of millions of Afghans, who have been eagerly waiting such a day for the past four decades.

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