

French President Sarkozy visits Afghanistan

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French President Nicolas Sarkozy made an unannounced one-day visit to Kabul, the capital of Afghanistan, on December 22. His visit was the first trip by a French president since the US-led invasion of Afghanistan more than six years ago. He pledged his support to the US-led occupation and the “war against terrorism,” though he did not commit to more involvement of French troops there.

He was accompanied by Defence Minister Hervé Morin, Foreign Minister Bernard Kouchner, who had visited India before joining Sarkozy in Afghanistan, Human Rights Minister Rama Yade and the philosopher André Glucksmann.

During his visit, he met with Afghan President Hamid Karzai and US General Dan McNeill, commander of the NATO-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF). He also met with some of the 1,600 French troops deployed in the capital, Kabul, and its surrounding areas.

After talks with Karzai, Sarkozy said, “What’s at stake is a war, a war against terrorism, which we cannot and must not lose.” He stressed the importance of the “strength of agreements between allies” and the need to present a “united front” to prevent Afghanistan from “becoming a terrorist state.”

Sarkozy’s visit reaffirms his political support for the US-led occupation of Afghanistan, which is generally seen within the French ruling elite as necessary for the advancement of France’s imperialist interests in Central Asia.

The Afghan presidential office issued a statement saying: “The French president emphasized the long-term political and military presence of his country in supporting the Afghan people and government.”

Sarkozy did not, however, acquiesce to US requests for further European military participation in the occupation of Afghanistan. NATO officials have sought more troops to station in the south, where anti-occupation fighting is the fiercest, but France, Germany, and other European powers have refused to commit substantial ground troops to the region.

Sarkozy avoided any commitments to increase French troop numbers or move French forces into the south. He said that French reinforcements would be “qualitative” rather than “quantitative,” and added that he did not think “the solution will be purely military.”

France has already lost 14 soldiers in Afghanistan, and there is strong popular opposition in France to US policy in the

Middle East and Central Asia. While a presidential candidate, Sarkozy made statements suggesting that a pull-out of French troops from Afghanistan might be imminent, though his subsequent policy has been to adhere closely to Washington’s wishes.

On April 26, just a few days after the first round of the French presidential elections, then-candidate Sarkozy said: “It was certainly useful to send [troops] to the extent that there was a struggle against terrorism. But the long-term presence of French troops in that part of the world does not seem to me to be decisive.”

Since the US-led occupation of Afghanistan started in 2001, France has been actively involved in Afghanistan as a major partner of the United States. It has about 1,600 troops and roughly 1,500 airmen and sailors there.

In 2001, France offered its military resources and capabilities to support the American-led military campaign. It was the only country outside the United States to fly bombing missions over Afghanistan in support of American ground troops.

French forces currently operate an air base in Dushanbe, in nearby Tajikistan, with three Mirage and three Rafale jets, in addition to heavy transport planes. They have also deployed several fighters to an air base in Qandahar, in war-torn southern Afghanistan.

France also plays a significant role in training the Afghan national army, having provided 50 special operations trainers, alongside those from the US and the United Kingdom, and trained three Afghan battalions of 500 men each. According to a statement by the French embassy in the US, France is presently involved in the training of all Afghan officers.

Though Sarkozy did not announce substantial new military measures, his visit to Afghanistan had definite political significance. By trailing a coterie of ministers and bourgeois intellectuals talking about democracy and human rights, Sarkozy gave political cover to the Bush administration and its occupation of Afghanistan. Sarkozy knew that he could rely on French bourgeois “left” parties—beginning with the Socialist Party, which essentially agrees with his Afghan policy—to not point out his hypocrisy in posing as a defender of human rights while proclaiming himself an ally of the Bush administration.

French imperialism has significant economic interests in the region, with the French oil firm Total having made major oil, gas and pipeline investments in Turkmenistan, Iran and the

other Persian Gulf countries. The French bourgeoisie lives in fear of the possibility that the revolutionary consequences of a serious defeat for US imperialism in Iraq and Afghanistan will make the region untenable for its economic and strategic interests. It is to protect these interests that Sarkozy has swung behind Washington's foreign policy.

The point was implied in a September 14 editorial in the right-wing daily *Le Figaro*, entitled "The New Petrochemical Yalta." *Figaro* lamented that third world producers are "determined to drive hard bargains in exchange for access to their oil," and foresaw that the oil industry's "balance of forces promises to be increasingly unfavorable" to "industrialized democracies like France."

The swing behind Washington has, however, an unstable and even desperate character. As most clearly shown by the initial stages of the US occupation of Iraq, when French energy companies were completely excluded from the country, the French bourgeoisie's interests will come distinctly second to those of the US, should US imperialism embark on further attempts at conquest in the Middle East. French investments in Iranian oil and gas fields, as well as in pipelines linking Iran and Central Asia, are all at risk.

In a broader sense, US Middle East policy is largely grounded on implicitly threatening the energy supply of all its capitalist rivals, including France. The spiraling geopolitical tensions provoked by US interventions in Southwest Asia are bound up with the struggle for control of oil and gas and its delivery to the major markets of Eurasia—Western Europe and East Asia. By occupying Iraq and threatening Iran, the US is blocking the most direct pipeline routes to move oil and gas to Western Europe: through Iran or Iraq, and then to Turkey and the Balkans.

Even greater risks are posed in the longer term. Barely a month after French Foreign Minister Kouchner's September announcement that the French military was planning for strikes on Iran in conjunction with the US, Bush said that the Iranian nuclear question raised the threat of World War III.

Fearing the French and Middle Eastern masses more than US imperialism, the French bourgeoisie has placed its bets on Washington. Sarkozy implicitly acknowledged the unpopularity with French workers of a pro-US foreign policy by downplaying France's Afghan engagement during the election campaign.

The fact that Sarkozy felt the need to trail around an intellectual charlatan like Glucksmann on his trip to Afghanistan further underlines the unpopularity of his policies. There was no military or administrative reason to bring Glucksmann—a writer and former radical academic whose main specialty has long been anti-communism, and who has no official positions in the French military or government. His main purpose was to provide a democratic coloration to Sarkozy's policy of subordination to and collaboration with US imperialism.

Glucksmann fulfilled the role intended for him in a December 24 interview with *Le Figaro* on the trip to Afghanistan.

He described "Western heads of state," including Bush, as men who "seek peace, who are not necessarily perfect democrats, but who go in the right direction." He proceeded to a potted account of recent Afghan history, saying, "It was the invasion of the Russian communists, and the destruction that followed, that allowed the installation of the fanatical Taliban."

He praised Sarkozy for "meeting French soldiers [in Afghanistan], whose courage we must salute." Speaking of Sarkozy, Glucksmann added, "He also gave his support to Hamid Karzai who is, for Al Qaeda, the number one target, and a very courageous figure."

The fact that Glucksmann can give such interviews and continue to be treated as an intellectual figure is a symptom of the crisis of intellectual and political life in France. His assertion of the democratic and humanitarian credentials of Western heads of state is ludicrous and sinister in the light of the US invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq and the construction of US torture camps like Guantánamo Bay.

As for his history of Afghanistan, it is a travesty. One does not have to sympathize with the Kremlin's 1979 intervention in Afghanistan to recognize the preeminent role of the US and its European allies in promoting and arming right-wing Islamists and international terrorists during the Soviet-Afghan war. In fact, as was first officially revealed by current US Defense Secretary Robert Gates in his 1997 book *From the Shadows*, the US funded the Islamic resistance to the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) regime starting in early 1979, months before the Soviet intervention, with a view to giving the USSR its own "Vietnamese quagmire." The US and its allies continued funding and arming anti-Soviet Afghan warlords until 1992.

The rise of the Taliban, amid the civil war that followed the 1992 implosion of the PDPA and its capitulation to the anti-Soviet mujahedin resistance, was likewise promoted by US imperialism, and particularly its local proxies—the Pakistani armed forces and the Saudi royal family. Karzai—whom Glucksmann improbably praises as some sort of democratic exemplar—was, in fact, one of the Taliban's earliest backers.



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