

France rules out rapid Afghanistan withdrawal

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President Nicolas Sarkozy will keep French troops in Afghanistan despite rising popular opposition in France to the NATO occupation following the January 20 deaths of four French soldiers, killed while they were training Afghan soldiers.

The attack that killed the French soldiers was carried out by a 21-year-old Afghan soldier with no direct links to the Taliban. He said that he decided to do it after seeing a video showing several American soldiers urinating on the heads of dead Afghans. (See “Ten NATO troops killed in Afghanistan”)

The reactions of the dead soldiers’ families highlighted widespread popular hostility in France to the French presence in Afghanistan. A sister of one of the deceased soldiers told RTL Radio: “It’s Nicolas Sarkozy’s fault that my brother died. He should bring everybody out of Afghanistan as soon as possible—all those young people, husbands, brothers. It’s not getting better, it’s getting worse and worse.”

Even before the incident, IFOP opinion polls showed growing opposition to France’s presence in Afghanistan—rising from 64 percent in August 2009, to 70 percent in August 2010, and to 74 percent in August 2011.

Only months from the May 2012 presidential elections, Sarkozy fears this popular opposition to the occupation of Afghanistan that has been going on now for over 10 years. His first reaction was to mention a possible withdrawal of troops before the official NATO date set for 2014, stating, “The French army is not in Afghanistan to get shot at by Afghan soldiers.”

He changed his mind on Wednesday, however, pompously declaring, “Let’s not misdirect our anger, let’s not be blinded by pain, however sharp it may be. The enemy today, yet again, is terrorism, which

disguised as an ally has attempted, through France, to strike at the very idea of freedom.”

After some interviews with his American counterpart Hillary Clinton, Foreign Minister Alain Juppé declared that the government did not intend “to give way to panic ...When I hear talk of immediate withdrawal, even at the end of 2012, I’m not convinced that this was fully thought through and studied.”

Juppé was making a dig at the presidential candidate of the French bourgeois “left”, François Hollande of the Socialist Party (PS), who had talked of a withdrawal in 2012 if he were to be elected president.

The decision to keep the French troops in Afghanistan is in line with the geo-political interests of French imperialism, which has tried to improve its relationship with the US and other European powers by placing its soldiers in the most dangerous areas of Afghanistan.

In August 2008, the Sarkozy government decided to change the placement of French soldiers, who until then had been confined to Kabul, in order to “put France quite clearly at the heart of the Western family, restore a relationship of confidence with the American people and leaders, and renew our relationship with the Atlantic Alliance.”

A *Le Figaro* editorial at the time praised this decision: “President Nicolas Sarkozy has restored the sense [of the French army’s intervention] by placing our contingent alongside our allies, in difficult territory.”

Sarkozy and Hollande’s first statements received a very sharp response internationally, revealing strong tensions within NATO on the issue.

These tensions had already emerged in March 2011 when the US defense secretary at the time, Robert Gates, gave a speech at NATO headquarters in Brussels

opposing a possible withdrawal of European powers from Afghanistan. He railed against those who “spoke too much about withdrawal and not enough about how to finish the job.”

His fears were based less on the risk of losing the large mineral resources of Afghanistan than on the effect of a disorderly withdrawal of the armed forces of different NATO countries on the alliance itself. The occupation of Afghanistan is numerically the largest of NATO’s operations and the prestige of the organization depends upon it to a great extent.

Intense Franco-American talks at the highest level took place last week with the participation of the US commander of NATO forces in Afghanistan, General John Allen. US Secretary of State Clinton finally declared, “We have no reason to believe that France does not wish to continue participating in the delicate transition process” in Afghanistan.

The German foreign minister, Guido Westerwelle, who had opposed France’s war of aggression in Libya last year, also called Sarkozy to order: “It is clear that such a setback must not stop our commitment to peace and reconciliation in Afghanistan.”

In the present context of a general economic crisis and a crisis of diplomatic relations, the full meaning emerges of another statement of Sarkozy’s in August 2008: “The world is entering a radically different period, which will last several decades and which I will qualify as ‘an era of relative powers’ ... [in this era] of scarce and dear energy ... the general interest comes far behind the vigorous defence of national priorities.”

In other words, the NATO powers, while agreeing on the fact that this institution must serve to pool resources to carry out imperialist policy, all seek to obtain maximum benefit for their individual interests.

The Netherlands withdrew from Afghanistan in August 2010, not wishing to renew their commitment that was expiring after four years of active service resulting in 24 dead and 130 wounded. The coalition government made up of the Labour Party and Christian Democrats collapsed because the Labourites did not dare to be associated with the renewal of the commitment in the face of popular hostility to the war.

This had seriously worried NATO leaders, despite the relatively small size of the Dutch contingent (2,000 men), due to the danger that other countries might follow suit. The NATO secretary general, Anders Fogh Rasmussen, had negotiated with the Christian Democrats to maintain a Dutch presence; the Labour Party agreed to a presence reduced to training Afghan personnel and a few planes and helicopters, thus leaving the door open to a subsequent return.

Even if François Hollande were to win the election, the French Socialist Party would be no less accommodating to NATO. Hollande may have initially called for “a rapid withdrawal”, but he was the leader of the party in 2001 when the government of Socialist Prime Minister Lionel Jospin was in power and France began its participation in the occupation of Afghanistan. Hollande expressed no reservations at the time.



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