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Egypt – “Silence is no longer an option”

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## France's complicity of war crimes in Egypt – "Silence is no longer an option"

*Albane de Rochebrune*

Disclose, [a French investigative journalism NGO](#), has uncovered crucial evidence exposing how France has fully collaborated with Sisi's regime in terms of military and political support to the point of active complicity in state crimes. This is based on the testimonial of a key source and the leak of hundreds of classified documents named the #EgyptPapers.

These revelations have shattered the veneer of Egypt's reputation as a strategic partner against terrorism. The regime looks unreliable and dishonest with its partners, and unwilling to fight terrorism. As explained by the head of the French Military Intelligence in a classified document dated June 1<sup>st</sup> 2017, Egypt's order of priorities *"is as follows: 1 - Trafficking, 2 - Illegal immigration, 3 - Terrorism"*.

Revealing classified information is forbidden by French law, even for whistle-blowers. This means that both the Disclose journalists and their source risk a 5-year prison sentence. But as the source puts it, *"If the Parliament could actually play its role, we would not be in this position today. The malfunctions of our system have led groups of individuals like us to breach the rules that were established to maintain such a system, exactly because it should not be maintained."* Indeed, in France, arms export licences are issued through an opaque system in which Parliament has no role and where politics and the French arms industry's turnover seem to have more weight than international law. This is how French-made mass surveillance systems and armoured vehicles have passed through the procedure and have been sold to autocratic regimes like Sisi's, despite their use against Egypt's own population.

The following is a reminder of the key points revealed by Disclose this week:

- France has provided Egypt with surveillance and intelligence services in a secret joint [military operation named Sirli](#) in the West of Egypt since February 2016. Since then, a French team accompanied by one Egyptian officer has flown over several parts of Western Egypt aboard a surveillance aircraft that *"would act as the ears and eyes for the team"*.
- According to Disclose, Sirli is aimed at collecting intelligence on potential terrorist threats coming from Libya. However, on multiple occasions, French military operatives involved in the operation

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raised their concerns that the intelligence transmitted to their Egyptian counterparts was actually used by Egyptian air force to strike civilians allegedly involved in contraband activities unrelated to terrorism. They also showed concern about the lack of intelligence cross-checking by Egyptians before striking. Based on the classified documents it has had access to, Disclose reveals that French forces have been involved in at least [19 bombings of civilians between 2016 and 2018](#) which amounts to the extrajudicial killings an estimated minimum of 100 civilians.

- In a classified assessment report about 96 missions led in 2016, an officer regrets that the *"terrorist problem has never been discussed"*. It also deplores the high number of restrictions imposed by the Egyptian partner including denying access to Sinai where the terrorists are. In multiple memos to their superiors, French military staff explicitly describe Sirli as being of no interest to the French anti-terrorism fight.
- Other documents attest that both President Hollande and President Macron's offices were repeatedly made aware of the operation and the concerns raised by the operatives as mentioned above. However, the Sirli operation is believed to continue today.

## ANTI-TERRORISM TRICK

For anyone who has been following the state of affairs in Egypt and the so-called strategic partnership between Egypt and France since the coup in July 2013, these leaks are not surprising. They sadly confirm and give life to what both rights defenders and political experts have been arguing all along: the 'fight against terrorism' narrative used by both countries is a pretext for far less honourable objectives i.e. uncriticized repression and arms sales. In fact, the French Centre for Analysis, Planning and Strategy, which operates under the authority of the Foreign Affairs Ministry, raised in a note dated from August 2016 that *"the ruthless repression offers recruitment opportunities to local jihadist movements"*.

"WE MUST SELL TO MAINTAIN OUR INDUSTRY ... WHATEVER THE COST", THE SOURCE

Both François Hollande's and Emmanuel Macron's governments have described the relationship between France and Egypt as a strategic partnership in the fight against terrorism. Since 2015 and the trauma of the series of terror attacks against France, fighting terrorism has become a magic pass to annihilate any critical among political leaders. *"Who can seriously believe that Sisi's authoritarian*

*regime can stabilise the region?"* asks Disclose's source and yet, there are very few MPs who question France's relationship with Egypt.

In their memos, French officers repeatedly raise the lack of interest of the military operation Sirli in the fight against terrorism. But political leaders ignored these alerts. It now seems clearer that the fight against terrorism argument has been used as a make-up cover for selling billions-worth of weapons, often used against Egyptian civilians and dissents and for ignoring the human rights crisis. In all likelihood, such an intimate relationship has also created a favourable context for unrelated infrastructure contracts such as the Cairo metro extension.

### JEAN-YVES LE DRIAN, ARMS EXPORT MINISTER

In fact, the whole French diplo-eco-military apparatus has mobilised to embrace the new regime following the Coup that ousted the first democratically elected President Morsi in July 2013. In this way they overlook the concerns shared by diplomats on this repression. Following the Rabaa Square massacre on August 14<sup>th</sup> 2013 where almost 1,000 protestors were killed by the Egyptian police and army forces, France co-signed an EU statement *"agreeing to suspend export licenses to Egypt of any equipment which might be used for internal repression"*. Yet, it still authorised the transfer to Egypt of various materials used by Sherpa armoured vehicles (built by Renault Trucks Defence), which had just been used in the past weeks against demonstrators.

In November 2013, [a note from the French government's military advisors](#) to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs indicated that the Egyptian regime was looking at *"modernising both its equipment and infrastructure before a new democratic government potentially holds it accountable"*. It goes further *"the Egyptian Ministry of Defence is waiting for a strong signal from France"* and *"incidentally, some countries have been rejected from certain prospective arms deals as a result of their overly strong political stance with regards to Egypt."*

A few months later, Jean-Yves Le Drian, then Minister of Defence, struck his first deal with the Egyptian navy for four Gowind-class corvettes and two FREMM frigates. [Dozens of billion-Euro deals have followed since](#), including Dassault Aviation Rafale jets, two Mistral assault vessels, Nexa Technologies mass surveillance software, ERCOM (now Thales) phone communications surveillance system, Airbus-Thales military satellite and Renault Truck Defence Bastion armoured vehicles.

Jean-Yves Le Drian who has visited Egypt at least 16 times since July 2013 quickly became pivotal in this special relationship. From 2012 until 2017, he was President Hollande's Minister of Defence. He was then appointed Foreign Affairs Minister by newly elected President Macron in June 2017 which has only strengthened his role as the French weapon industry salesperson. Disclose has published a questionnaire filled in October 2017 by [French Ambassador in Cairo Stéphane Romatet](#), which aimed at understanding power sharing among the regime. It states, *"the mobilisation of all of our networks (military, intelligence, economic) is required to improve access to the military economy sector"*.

## EGYPT IS NOT A RELIABLE PARTNER

Disclose quotes Jalel Harchaoui, from the Swiss NGO Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime, who states that the terrorist threat from Libya is *"largely overestimated by the Egyptian army in order to obtain support on the international stage"*. Disclose also mentions a diplomatic meeting in 2017 with David Satterfield, then Near Eastern Assistant Secretary of State and former Director General of the peacekeeping force in Sinai from 2009 to 2017. During the meeting, David Satterfield observed that *"Egyptian armed forces are not interested in the fight against terrorism in the Sinai"* and that terrorism is a *"vested interest"* for the regime, justifying both international support and repression.

In Sinai where the estimated number of insurgents does not exceed 1,200, Sisi has so far failed to establish security. In a memo leaked by Disclose, a French officer deplores that they are not allowed by Egypt to fly over Sinai where there actually are terrorists.

In fact, Disclose's investigation confirms very bluntly how uninterested the regime has been in fighting terrorism. And yet, France and the EU along with the US have kept naming Egypt a "strategic partner in the fight against terrorism". Unsurprisingly, Egypt has censored Disclose's website. Again, the fight against terrorism is an essential pillar to the regime's own justification.

Disclose's journalists have shown another concerning aspect of Sisi's regime: its unreliability. Although it was certainly motivated by the prospect of selling more weapons to Egypt, France was drawn into this surveillance project on the basis of assisting Egypt in combating terrorism threats from Libya and collecting terrorism-related data for its own use, such as potential French terrorists based in Egypt. But as mentioned above, by the end of 2016, a French officer's memo regrets that the *"terrorist*

*problem has never been discussed". Similar statements can be found further in many other classified documents through the years. As Disclose's source puts it, "For years, Egypt was a minor partner: few exchanges, few high level State visits, no economic or serious military partnership, and it [military partnership] is still not the case".*

## A BRUTAL AUTOCRATIC REGIME AND ITS ACCOMPLICE

Through its investigations, Disclose gives evidence of dozens of extra-judicial killings committed by the Egyptian regime against civilians. These "bad guys" as Christophe Gomart, the former head of the French Military Intelligence, puts it were mostly local traffickers smuggling cigarettes, alcohol or rice bags and some of them were just in the wrong place at the wrong time. In a documentary about the #EgyptPapers, Agnes Callamard, former UN Rapporteur on extra-judicial killings, reminds viewers that under international law, one cannot kill on the basis of the criminal identity of an individual and qualifies the killings as "state crimes".

Although this remains to be confirmed, these crimes against civilians are widespread and might amount to crimes against humanity. As the French government has authorised Operation Sirli to continue despite the multiple alerts from its own officers, can France be qualified as a co-perpetrator? Contrary to Egypt, France has ratified the Rome Statute. This means an ICC complaint could be prepared and filed. Potential legal actions could also be undertaken with the African Commission on Human Rights.

## REPRESSION AND TERRORISM

Disclose's source explains "The excesses of the French politico-military actions are what make me break the silence rule. They deeply slash the reasons why men and women are serving their country."

Indeed, the costs of these 'stability' and 'fight against terrorism' made-up narratives are tragic. The first victims are Egyptians. Hundreds have been killed arbitrarily outside of any legal framework. The second victims are the 65,000 political prisoners in Egypt, their relatives and friends, including Céline Lebrun Shaath, Ramy Shaath's French wife, the Egyptian human rights defenders and the hopes of the Arab Spring that have been betrayed by France. Let's not forget about another category of victims: the victims of terrorism. As raised at multiple occasions both by French intelligence services and

academics, the ruthless repression and the duplicity of the French government help terrorist groups recruiting new fighters.

## REACTIONS AND PERSPECTIVES

Disclose's revelations have sparked mixed reactions in France. Along with Human Rights NGOs, two left-wing parties (La France Insoumise and Les Verts) officially called for a parliament-led investigation. The right-wing opposition, which is in the middle of an internal election to select the next Presidential candidate, did not comment.

Independent MP Sébastien Nadot, who famously denounced the use of French arms in Yemen by the UAE and Saudi Arabia, has announced that he intends to file a complaint at the European Court for Human Rights. He also called for French arms industrials to take responsibilities: *"How can we send such a sophisticated surveillance system to a dictatorship like Egypt, when one just has to open any newspaper to know what's happening there?"*. Talking about the fundamental role of the French Minister of Foreign Affairs in the scandal, Nadot added, *"If Jean-Yves Le Drian has a bit of respect for the French Republic that he's supposed to be serving, resigning is the least he can do"*.

Meanwhile, the French government's spokesperson announced that a complaint would be filed against the leak of classified information and that an internal investigation would be done to uncover Disclose's sources. Former President François Hollande stated that he was not aware of the misuse of French intelligence by the Egyptian partner to arbitrarily strike civilians.

Through the arms trade, revolving military aid, IMF loans and State visits, since 2013-2014, Sisi's regime has received political support from France along with the USA, the UK, Germany and Italy. In response to human rights groups' criticism, they all claimed to have no choice but to work with Egypt as a key partner in the fight against terrorism.

The #EgyptPapers have destroyed this narrative: Egypt is not fighting terrorism but has used this excuse as a green light to crush the Egyptian society into submission. Sisi's regime has arbitrarily murdered thousands of its own people. France knows it and is in fact an accomplice. France and other Western arms sellers' collaboration with the regime has nothing to do with terrorism or diplomacy but greed and blood money.