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## Operation Sirli and systematic killing of Egyptian civilians

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Documented reports recently revealed by "Disclose", a well-known French investigative website, have raised an uproar in both France and Egypt, concerning secret security and intelligence cooperation between the two countries that began in 2016, and is still ongoing despite the fact that it has been exposed at both political and media levels.

This "cooperation", which was launched under the code name of "Operation Sirli", has led to the killing of thousands of Egyptian civilians, under the pretext of "fighting terrorism" in areas of Egypt's western desert, close to the Libyan border. However, the bilateral political, security and commercial interests between France and Egypt have mainly motivated development of relations between a robust Western "democratic" state and an Arab para-military regime.

### Leaks and their implications

The French website says that a certain source had sent it hundreds of classified documents from Élysée Palace, the Ministry of the Armed Forces (Ministère des Armées) and the Directorate of Military Intelligence (Direction du renseignement militaire), which reveal the abuses of the French intelligence mission that began in February 2016, under the pretext of fighting terrorism.

The leaks show how the Egyptian regime diverted the military and intelligence cooperation with France hidden from the public in favor of carrying out an arbitrary execution campaign, where the former French president François Hollande and his successor, Emmanuel Macron, were constantly informed of the crimes that had been committed, but without any consequences<sup>1</sup>.

Operation Sirli began on 25 July 2015, when Jean-Yves Le Drian, French Defense Minister under President François Hollande, and current Foreign Minister traveled to Cairo together with General Christophe Jomart, the Director of Military Intelligence, where he met his Egyptian counterpart Sedki

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<sup>1</sup> Covert French Operation Sirli in Egypt raises controversy, Arabi Post, 22 November 2021, [link](#)

Sobhy – after Le Drian had just concluded contracts for selling 24 Rafale combat aircraft and two French-made Fremm frigates to Egypt for 5.6 billion euros.

The agenda of the meeting stated: securing 1,200 kilometers of Egypt's border with Libya amid a state of chaos in the neighboring country, where the Egyptian Defense Minister at the time confirmed existence of certain "urgent needs" in the field of air intelligence. On the other hand, Jean-Yves Le Drian pledged to implement "practical and immediate cooperation" in the framework of a "global counterterrorism maneuver", in the form of an unofficial mission led by the French Military Intelligence Directorate launched from an Egyptian military base. However, no official document has been signed between the two countries specifying the purpose of the operation.

The mission of the French team, code-named ELT 16, was to survey the Egyptian Western desert for potential terrorist threats coming from Libya, where an Egyptian officer used to accompany the French team on every flight to directly listen to the intercepted phone calls and conversations.

But the French team soon realized that the intelligence they were providing to the Egyptians was being used to kill civilians suspected of smuggling; and that the fight against terrorism seemed far from what was happening on the ground, a fact that they notified their leaders of at regular intervals, but to no avail<sup>2</sup>.

In July 2020, the Egyptian presidency announced that over the past seven years, 10,000 vehicles filled with terrorists and smugglers were destroyed, and 40,000 people were killed!

At the end of the summer of 2016, agents of the French Military Intelligence Directorate clearly concluded that the mission was not of interest, especially that the air-surveyed areas remained strictly limited to the west of the country, where armed groups were almost non-existent, as they were prevented from covering the territory in Libya and Sinai, where the terrorist threat was real.

According to classified documents obtained by Disclose, French forces were involved in at least 19 bombings that killed Egyptian civilians between 2016 and 2018. French air raids often destroyed

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid

several vehicles, with hundreds of victims. According to the criteria of UN General Assembly Resolution 56/83, France's complicity in extrajudicial executions can be proven.

The Disclose investigative report reveals that only two months after the launch of Operation Sirli, the French Military Intelligence Directorate concluded, through a memo issued by a French officer on 20 April 2016, that the Egyptian side only wanted to carry out direct operations against smugglers, and that there was no real interest in using the surveys carried out by the surveillance jet in search of real terrorist elements. The same thing was reiterated four months after the first memo, where the new memo stated that the Egyptian regime targeted smugglers, not terrorists, and those smugglers were young people between 18 to 30 of age who usually smuggle drugs; grains such as wheat and rice; cosmetics; and sometimes weapons<sup>3</sup>.

In a statement after publishing its report , Disclose stated that the real motive behind bringing this information to light is legal in the first place, taking into account that the funding for these military operations comes from the budget of the Ministry of Defense, which means that all available information about Operation Sirli must be disclosed to Members of Parliament, being the representatives of the French people.

For its part, Egypt has not yet officially commented on report of the French website, but only added "Disclose" to the list of blocked websites in Egypt<sup>4</sup>.

### Eavesdropping programs and arms deals

In the context of expanding areas of security, intelligence, and military cooperation between France and Egypt, Disclose published another episode within the Egypt Papers series of reports, under the title, "Monitoring Made in France":

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<sup>3</sup> Scandal of the French leaks.. What is the story of Operation Sirli, where Paris participated in liquidation of civilians in Egypt?, Al-Mahdi Al-Zeidawi, Al Jazeera Net, 25 November 2021, [link](#)

<sup>4</sup> Ibid



The new episode revealed that three French companies transferred spyware technology to the Egyptian government, and oversaw the operation of a surveillance network aimed at obtaining collective information from communications networks in Egypt.

According to hundreds of documents obtained by Disclose in its joint investigation with Télérâma, Nexa Technologies won a contract worth 11.4 million euros in 2014 to install an online monitoring software called Cerebro; while Ercom-Suneris won a contract worth nearly 15 million euros in the same year to install an eavesdropping and geolocation device called Cortex Vortex. Also, the French arms giant Dassault Systèmes won a contract to provide a survey and access program to link the data to be collected with the Egyptian national database.

Also, the Disclose report stated that Egypt has built a giant data server in cooperation with the American company DataDirect Networks, bought new Dell computers, and controlled traffic from submarine communications (internet) cables linking the country to Europe for data analysis.

According to the EU arms treaties to which France is a party, the export of dual-use technologies must be approved through a state-level regulatory process. According to Disclose, the export of Cerebro and Cortex has been approved by a body under the French Economy Ministry charged with regulating dual-use technologies.

Commenting on Disclose, Nexa said: "If the French state had had the slightest doubt about supplying Cerebro to Egypt, it would have rejected export of the technology..."<sup>5</sup>.

The Disclose report indicated that the main orchestrator of this secret diplomacy was Jean-Yves Le Drian, the Minister of Defense in the government of former French President François Hollande, and the current Minister of Foreign Affairs.

The French website reported that in this regard, French diplomats were asked to remain silent about "the endless repression that gives local jihadist groups an opportunity to recruit and attract more members, and that this was applied even during the "clandestine" meetings of the Inter-ministerial

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<sup>5</sup> Disclose: France provided Egypt with "comprehensive surveillance and espionage" technologies for the Internet and communications, Mada Masr, 25 November 2021, [link](#)

Committee for the Export of Military Equipment, which was engaged at that time in considering requests to export arms to Egypt.

At a meeting held on 26 May 2016, which was devoted to examining a request for the sale of 25 armored personnel vehicles with artillery turrets, worth 34.4 million euros, the French Foreign Ministry opposed the export request, due to fears of using them in internal repression; however, the Defense Minister's office ignored these concerns, confirming that these armored vehicles were intended for units deployed in Sinai and contribute to the war on terrorism<sup>6</sup>.

### Dimmer reaction to "Disclose" investigation

No influential international or Arab positions or reactions were issued regarding the scandal of Egyptian army's targeting of civilians near the Egyptian-Libyan border over the past years. However, the Human Rights Watch called on the French authorities to "immediately investigate" allegations on involvement in aerial attacks against civilians in a joint "covert operation" with Egypt at the Libyan border in 2016-2018. "France should immediately investigate the allegations made by Disclose into the reconnaissance mission in Egypt's western desert and suspend all sales of security-related assistance to the Egyptian government," HRW statement read. The rights watchdog also called on Paris to stop selling arms to the Egyptian government. The HRW noted that France had previously aided the appalling human rights record" of Egypt under the government of Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, one of France's top arms clients, according to the report of the rights watchdog which added that "France continues to sign major arms deals with Sisi's government -- also under a pretext of security and fighting terrorism -- despite evidence that some of these weapons had been used to violently suppress protests and commit other human rights violations."<sup>7</sup>

### Why the French army?

Some may wonder why the Egyptian army used its French counterpart in particular to survey the border between Egypt and Libya. The answer is that in addition to the distinguished relations between

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid

<sup>7</sup> Rights watchdog demands probe into France's role in airstrikes on civilians in Egypt, Anadolu Agency, 24 November 2021, [link](#)

the two parties, politically and militarily, the Egyptian military institution realizes well the extent of France's interest in that particular spot, due to considerations related to geopolitics and colonial history, where that spot is a gateway to the Mediterranean, Europe, and the Sahel and Sahara countries, which are among the top priorities of Paris' anti-terror agenda

In addition, there are other reasons, including the Turkish-French rivalry in Libya, and the presence of actual Paris intelligence activities in that region for the purpose of monitoring the activities of armed Islamist groups there.

But since the Egyptian army lacks advanced monitoring equipment, at least at that time, to survey phone calls and activities on the western desert and the border with Libya, which prompted it to seek France's support in this regard, why did it refuse to extend such cooperation to the eastern front as well?

The answer is simply that "covert" intelligence cooperation with regard to the management of hostilities on the eastern border is exclusively limited to the United States and the Israeli occupation - where the United States provides the Egyptian army from time to time with advanced systems for the purpose of developing the management of combat operations against ISIS, including communications, monitoring and control systems, attack helicopters and armored vehicles, especially after circulated reports about the incompetence of Egyptian army - without obtaining support - to take on these battles.

Due to the fact that Israel possesses advanced technology, it supports the Egyptian army in that battle on the ground to enhance security cooperation between them, which is a key objective for the Egyptian side, given that it is considered a gateway to deepening relations with Washington; in addition to an Israeli interest in controlling the border with Egypt away from the chaos caused by organizations close to ISIS, with whom "security coordination" cannot be carried out and whose reaction is really unexpected. On the other hand, security coordination with Egypt helps prevent the flow of weapons to Hamas in the Gaza Strip through the Egyptian border, or through underground tunnels.

Therefore, there was no need to seek the assistance of another ally (France) in that region, in light of the existence of secret coordination with the Israeli occupation that would help in maximizing the Egyptian regime's standing with Washington.

However, there are assumingly ways other than killing to control the border with Libya; in addition to the fact that the Egyptian military institution does not have a problem with the smuggling activity itself, as it can allow it, within controls related to coordination with security services and revenue sharing, as was attributed to Major General Kamel al-Wazir in a video clip when he was head of the Armed Forces Engineering Authority, showing al-Wazir while assuring some "people of Marsa Matrouh" that they can maintain "smuggling", but in accordance with the previous terms.

Most likely, the matter has to do with timing; where at that time, the Egyptian authorities had concerns that things would go awry in the western part of the country, in light of the army's preoccupation with fighting the insurgency on the eastern front, against the backdrop of the security vacuum caused by the fall of the Gaddafi regime in Libya.

In short, there was great concern that weapons, and explosives would fall into the hands of the anti-Egyptian regime armed factions and insurgents active in the east, west and in the Nile Valley at that time. However, there were orders given to the Western Military Zone and the air bases located on the western direction to target any suspicious moving object through fighters and helicopters, which led to the oasis incident in which several Mexican tourists were killed, in addition to the killing of Eng. Ahmed al-Fiqi and his friends, as stated by Disclose's investigation, just 20 minutes after they moved from one of the mines in Bahariya Oasis.

In addition, Sisi had been planning, even during the days of Morsi's rule, to re-organize the demography of the strategic western direction, through a series of giant projects, the budget of which was estimated at billions of dollars, notably the Dabaa nuclear plant project the new El Alamein city, and the huge "Egypt's future" agricultural project, which is currently supervised by the Air Force, as well as the construction of a number of military bases, where all this requires "cleansing" the area and ensure its security.

It is noteworthy that targeting civilians in the western desert came within the framework of the policy of "brute force" adopted by Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, in the aftermath of the events of 3 July 2013, to re-



establish the state's prestige in line with developments at the time, and later allow for the expropriation of property from disputed areas between the state and citizens, with the aim of re-planning and investment offers, as happened in Al-Warraaq, Maspero and Nazlet Al-Samman<sup>8</sup>.

Finally, it seems that France and Egypt have secretly agreed to ignore the outcomes of the "Disclose" investigation with the aim of undermining the media controversy about it. However, despite everything, it remains useful to shed light on the suspicious roles of ruling regimes, which may amount to war crimes and crimes against humanity, in the hope that one day perpetrators of the bloodshed of Egyptians will be legally convicted for committing such atrocities, as happened in previous historical experiences across the world<sup>9</sup>.

## Conclusion

In light of all these serious documented data, which have not been denied by the official French and Egyptian governments, except for attempts to distort their contents, all countries committed to democracy and human rights, as well as relevant international, regional and Arab institutions, the Arab League, and non-governmental organizations, human rights advocates, both in Egypt and abroad - all of them are asked to follow up on the various details of the crimes committed by the Egyptian regime against hundreds and perhaps thousands of unarmed civilians, under the pretext of combating terrorism and smuggling in Egypt's western desert, most of which are unjustifiable in any case, whether at the political or the legal or humanitarian levels. In fact, this may pave the way for filing collective or individual lawsuits against the regime in Egypt, as well as against France, in preparation for convicting them, and demanding moral and financial compensation for the families of the Egyptian victims, commensurate with the size of the crimes committed against their beloved ones, some of which were recently revealed by the French investigative website.

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<sup>8</sup> Sultan, Ahmed. The rules of the game have changed after years of coordination.. Why did the Egyptian army target smugglers with French assistance? Arabi Post, 28 November 2021, [link](#)

<sup>9</sup> Ibid