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French-Egyptian Relations: Partnership and Military Cooperation

Dr. Mohammed Issam Laaroussi

The French-Egyptian relations have undergone a pivotal shift during the reign of Egypt's Abdel Fattah al-Sisi since 2013. The basic features of this change have become clear through the remarkable development and convergence that the two countries' bilateral relations witnessed on many levels, culminating in exchange of visits at the level of heads of state between France and Egypt, as well as the change of the French position along with, relatively speaking, the European position toward the Sisi government.

Nevertheless, there have been many European and French reservations, notably about the nature of the new political elite's management of internal contradictions and the remarkable decline in human rights, public freedoms and the peaceful transfer of power.

However, the experience of Islamists in government lasted for no more than a year, without enjoying support of Western countries, and it ultimately ended quickly, paving the way for the return of authoritarian regimes to the region after the democratic transition experience in both Egypt and Tunisia.

In the wake of the events of the Arab Spring, France announced at the time that it supported the peaceful democratic path in the Middle East and North Africa region, but later retracted this temporary approach, and ultimately adopted acceptance of the autocratic and military style of government. It even tended to engage in a kind of partnership with Cairo, especially after the temporary decline in American support for the Sisi regime after the 2013 military coup.

Convergence and partnership

Based on such pragmatic perspective in dealing with Middle East issues and files, Egyptian-French relations have witnessed a remarkable convergence since Abdel Fattah al-Sisi assumed power in Egypt, where official visits between the two countries exceeded twenty at the level of heads of state, ministers and senior officials since November 2014, which reflected convergence of views on bilateral issues, especially the Palestinian cause and the Libyan crisis, as well as the two countries' desire to

consolidate their partnership that extends over two centuries in the economic, military and cultural fields.

French President Emmanuel Macron's visit to Egypt in early 2019 was the sixth presidential visit between the two countries within only four years, as former President Francois Hollande was an honorary guest during the opening ceremony of the new Suez Canal duct in 2015 before he made an official visit to Egypt in 2016, while Sisi visited Paris in 2014, 2017, 2021 and 2022, in addition to participation in the 2015 climate summit in Paris, representing the African continent.

Economic relations between Egypt and France during the era of Sisi have significantly developed, as there are about 150 French companies operating in Egypt, employing approximately 33 thousand people, and the total contracts of the French Development Agency amount to about one billion euros concentrated in the fields of energy and urban transport, as revealed by the French Embassy in Cairo.

Egypt remains France's forty-third partner at the global level, its eighth customer in the Middle East and North Africa region, and its first customer within the Middle East region¹.

Egypt is also a privileged partner to the European Union member states, most prominently France. After the Obama administration temporarily abandoned its diplomatic relations with Sisi, the strategic rapprochement between Paris and Cairo, especially with regard to the war against ISIS and hostility to the Muslim Brotherhood, has already translated into a diplomatic rapprochement by virtue of France's multiple interests in Egypt².

However, forms of bilateral cooperation between the two countries are not limited to arms deals only, as the French state is now investing more than 4.6 billion euros in the Egyptian infrastructure projects, based on an agreement signed on 14 June 2021, including provision of 800 million euros to the Egyptian government in the form of government loans³, one billion euros provided by the French

¹ Mohsen Semeika: The rapprochement of Egyptian-French relations since Sisi came to power, [link](#)

² Aiden Lewis, UPDATE 2-France agrees to 1.8 bln euros in financing for Egypt, UPDATE 2-France agrees to 1.8 bln euros in financing for Egypt | Reuters, [link](#)

³ William Horobin, France Backs Up to 3.8 Billion Euros in Financing for Egypt, June 13, 2021, France Backs Up to 3.8 Billion Euros in Financing for Egypt – Bloomberg, [link](#)

Development Agency (AFD), and two billion euros in the form of bank loans guaranteed by the French state, provided that French companies implement these projects⁴.

Military cooperation

Egypt has become an important partner in French arms sales under Sisi: in 2015, Egypt was the first country to buy 24 Rafale fighters⁵, as well as a multi-role Fremm frigate and air-to-air cruise missiles, worth 5.2 billion euros, manufactured in five months. In 2017, Egypt became France's main arms customer⁶, which enabled France to position itself ahead of the United States as a major arms supplier to Egypt. Some French companies also contributed to the economic development of Egypt, as Vinci et Bouygues in particular contributed to the development of the Cairo subway⁷.

Egypt is considered one of the most important customers of the French arms industry, and the second largest market for French military equipment after India. Egyptian-French relations regarding arms deals were greatly boosted between 2016 and 2020, as French arms exports to Egypt increased by 44% compared to the period between 2011 and 2015, in which Egypt received about 20%⁸ of French arms exports.

The major deals concluded by Cairo with Paris to purchase Rafale fighters between 2015 and 2021 are considered the most expensive arms deals ever concluded by Egypt, worth 5.2 and 4.5 billion euros, respectively⁹.

It should be noted that the loans granted to Egypt by France are among the main sources of financing most of the major arms deals between the two countries. In 2015, France granted Egypt loans

⁴ Kareem Saleem , L'EUROPE DOIT-ELLE MAINTENIR SON SOUTIEN AU PRÉSIDENT AL-SISSI ?, [link](#)

⁵ 24 Rafale vendus à L'Egypte : les coulisses d'un contrat historique, [link](#)

⁶ Ventes d'armes : qui sont les principaux clients de la France ? Selon un rapport publié par l'Institut de recherche de Stockholm pour la paix, l'Hexagone a été le troisième plus gros exportateur d'armes du monde entre 2013 et 2017, [link](#)

⁷ Au Caire, Vinci et Bouygues prolongeront le métro pour 1 milliard d'euros, la Tribune.fr le 18 avril 2016, [link](#)

⁸ Pieter d. wezeman, alexandra kuimova and siemon t. wezeman, TRENDS IN INTERNATIONAL ARMS TRANSFERS, 2020, SIPRI Fact Sheet, March 2021, [link](#)

⁹ Egypt, France to conclude €5.2 billion deal for Rafale jets, France24, [link](#)

amounting to 3.2 billion euros¹⁰, while in 2021, Egypt relied on a French financing loan of 4.5 billion euros¹¹ in the purchase of the recent Rafale deal.

At the level of non-public military and intelligence cooperation, Disclose, a French website for investigative journalism, on 21 November 2021¹² published hundreds of classified French official documents revealing violations committed during France's clandestine military operation in Egypt known as "Operation Sirli". The investigation highlighted France's involvement in airstrikes against civilians, between 2016 and 2018, where Disclose received hundreds of confidential documents revealing violations committed during this counter-terrorism intelligence operation, which began in February 2016 in Egypt's Western desert, near the Libyan border.

The documents show how this secret military cooperation deviated from its objectives, including exploration of terrorist activity by militants infiltrating the 1,200-kilometre-long Egyptian-Libyan border, turning into a campaign of arbitrary extrajudicial executions and state crimes¹³.

The documents also exposed the Egyptian government's use of a massive cyber-monitoring system under supervision of three French companies operating in Egypt with the approval of the French authorities.

In 2014, the Egyptian government was able to obtain highly advanced electronic monitoring systems developed by the French giants Nexa, Arcom, Sonaire, and Dassault Systems, after obtaining the approval of the French Ministry of Economy, which was then headed by the current French President Emmanuel Macron¹⁴.

On the other hand, the French-Egyptian military coordination included carrying out several joint exercises, most prominently:

¹⁰ 3.2 billion euros of Egypt-French arms deal financed by loan from Paris: Sisi, [link](#)

¹¹ Egypt to buy Rafale fighter jets worth \$4.5bn from France, al Jazeera, [link](#)

¹² Operation Sirli report, NOVEMBER 21, 2021, Operation Sirli - Egypt Papers, Disclose, [link](#)

¹³ Mohammed Issam Laaroussi: The French military and intelligence role in Egypt in light of the Disclose website report, 24 December 2021, the Egyptian Institute for Studies, [link](#)

¹⁴ Majed Manzour: Cairo-Paris Alliance, 21 January 2022, [link](#)

- Cross-functional joint Egyptian-French naval training: In July 2020, the Egyptian and French navies carried out a naval exercise in the Mediterranean, with the participation of the Egyptian frigate "Tahya Masr" and the French frigate "ACONIT", where the training included many professional activities, including activities focusing on ways of organizing cooperation in carrying out combat missions at sea against hostile naval formations, in addition to the actual use of weapons in engagement with surface and air targets. The training also witnessed the implementation of combat battles using seaborne aircraft¹⁵.

- Cross-functional joint Egyptian-French training - Ramses 2021: In early May 2021, the Egyptian and French forces carried out a joint exercise, Ramses 2021, at one of the Egyptian air bases, in addition to a naval exercise within the scope of the southern fleet, with the participation of the Egyptian frigate Segm Al-Fateh in the naval training, along with the French combat group accompanying the aircraft carrier Charles de Gaulle. The air training included implementation of many training activities and joint flights, with the participation of a group of the latest models of multi-tasking fighters from both sides. The cross-functional naval training included implementation of many joint training activities, achieving maximum benefit for both parties¹⁶.

- Cross-functional joint training between the Egyptian and French navies: In June 2021, the French and Egyptian navies carried out a cross-functional naval exercise in the scope of the Northern Fleet, with the participation of the Egyptian ghost frigate Segm Port Said and the French ghost frigate LA FAYETTE. The training included implementation of air defense exercises and tactical exercises for naval units, with exercises on electronic warfare and naval security, to reduce the risks of surface and air threats¹⁷.

It is certain that Paris will be keen during the next stage to confirm its orientations towards Egypt. France will tend to boost its relations with Egypt by supporting the two countries' bilateral relations,

¹⁵ Military exercises in the eastern Mediterranean between regional competitors.. Get to know them, The New Gulf, 25 July 2020, [link](#)

¹⁶ Egypt and France conduct the joint training Ramses 2021, Arab Defense, 9 May 2021, [link](#)

¹⁷ With participation of ghost frigates ... Egypt and France carry out a cross-functional naval exercise, Sputnik, 5 June 2021, [link](#)

albeit sometimes conflicting with the European Union policy, with persistence of disharmony and disagreement between France and some EU countries on many issues and crises, such as the Libyan crisis and Egypt's human rights record¹⁸.



¹⁸ The views expressed in this article are entirely those of the author's and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Egyptian Institute for Studies