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The Cairo-Paris axis: a complex set of interests and affinities

Sources: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace

On November 21, 2021, the French NGO Disclose released a set of classified documents from the French intelligence services and army that have revealed a broad alliance between the French state and the Egyptian government.

The leak, titled "Egypt Papers," has two important revelations: the first concerns [Operation Sirli](#), which began on February 13, 2016 in the Western Desert, near the Libyan border. According to the documents, French intelligence officers, pilots and technicians were integrated into the Egyptian armed forces with the stated aim of fighting alleged activists infiltrated on the 1200 km border with Libya.

According to leaked French documents, the operation also resulted in human rights violations, which were also corroborated by local media reports. They documented a case in which three civilians were killed by an airstrike in the Western Desert in July 2017, as well as the killing of 21 Mexican tourists in 2015, also by an airstrike in the Western Desert. The second revelation revolves around the deployment of highly advanced electronic surveillance systems Nexa Technologies,[1] Ercom and Suneris [companies acquired in 2019 by Thales], and Dassault Systèmes, all of which are French companies. The sale was approved in 2014 by the French Economy Ministry, led at the time by current President Emmanuel Macron.

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The alliance between the French state and the Egyptian government is based on a complex set of financial interests, parallel foreign policy objectives, and ideological affinities. More particularly, these shared financial interests include massive arms contracts between Cairo and Paris. Between 2016 and 2020, French arms exports increased by 44% compared to 2011-2015, with Egypt receiving 20% of French arms exports, making it the second largest customer, after India, of French arms. The most expensive purchases so far have been the French jet aircraft Rafale, purchased under two major arms contracts in 2015 and 2021, worth 5.2 billion euros and 4.5 billion euros, respectively. It's also worth noting the structure of these arms contracts: some of the largest arms transfers are financed by French loans, including a €3.2 billion loan in 2015 and an undisclosed loan to finance the last €4.5 billion contract in 2021. The regressive nature of the Egyptian tax system, where the tax burden is borne by the lower and middle classes, means that this agreement effectively transfers the income of the lower and middle classes to the French arms industry.

This also means that, in addition to the benefits derived from arms contracts, interest payments are another source of profit for French creditors, including the French state. The importance of these arms contracts for the French state has led to the dominance of the French army, and not the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, in the management of the state's relations with the Egyptian government.

This method of financing is not limited to arms sales, as France has invested 4.6 billion euros in the Egyptian government's infrastructure projects. The agreement was signed on June 14 and includes 800 million euros in government loans, one billion euros from the AFD (the French Development Agency) and 2 billion euros in bank loans guaranteed by the French state. Projects must be carried out by French companies.

In addition to facilitating capital flows and wealth transfers to France, France and Egypt have similar foreign policy objectives, especially in Libya. Both sides supported Libyan general, and now presidential candidate Khalifa Haftar, in his effort to wrest power from Tripoli's Government of National Accord (GNA); at that time it was the internationally recognized government in Tripoli (between 2019-2020). This policy, among other factors, exacerbated the civil war in the country and encouraged the general to try to take Tripoli by force, which eventually turned against him after a strong Turkish intervention in January 2020.

The two allies also strongly oppose the Turkish presence in Libya. After Haftar's defeat in Tripoli, Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi threatened direct military intervention and proclaimed that any attempt by Turkish-backed GNA forces to seize the city of Sirte would involve crossing a red line for Egyptian national security. Macron echoed this view, declaring in June 2020 that France "will not tolerate Turkey's role in Libya." He called on Turkey to withdraw its troops. It should be noted, however, that Egyptian-Turkish relations have shown signs of improvement since then. However, despite this cooling of tensions, Turkey has rejected calls by Sisi and Macron to withdraw foreign troops from Libya. The results of this reconciliation are unclear, and a relaxation of positions remains a possibility that looms.

Finally, Macron and Sisi showed a striking ideological resemblance regarding their desire to "reform" Islam and, by extension, their fierce opposition to political Islam. It is interesting to note that both aim, in different contexts, to appropriate politicized Islamic discourse and bring it under state control. For example, in October 2020, President Macron described Islam as a "religion in crisis," while proclaiming his government's intention to publish a law to combat "Islamic separatism." This statement was followed by the publication, in December, of a law strengthening state control over schools, mosques and sports clubs, allowing officials to close mosques and dissolve religious organizations without a court decision. Although Islam is not explicitly mentioned in this law, there is no doubt that it is directed towards French Muslims. This policy shift must be seen in the context of the growing competition between Macron and the far right in the sphere of identity politics, more specifically that relating to immigration, minorities, and the place of Islam and Muslims in France.

For his part, President Sisi has repeatedly called for Islamic renewal with the aim of consolidating the government's grip on religious discourse and eliminating competing centers of social power, namely Al-Azhar, the country's main religious institution. The government's attempts to exert control over religious discourse can be understood in the context of its attempt to centralize social power and create a state version of Islam rooted in a deeply conservative social spirit. Even if the context is different, this ideological congruence is remarkable, because it partly clarifies the ideological justification for French support for a government whose record of human rights violations is appalling.

The consequences of the alliance between Macron and Sisi may threaten long-term regional stability both in the Middle East and North Africa and in Europe. French support for the Egyptian government does not reduce repression and contributes to the impoverishment of the middle and lower classes in Egypt[2]. It is also important to note that the alliance between Sisi and Macron is part of a broader European policy, with countries such as Italy and Germany following very similar practices in terms of arms exports and financial transactions, albeit less flagrantly. These relations, if based on a policy of ignoring human rights violations and economic pressures, can only increase social unrest, violent radicalization and possibly encourage refugee flows due to worsening repression and deteriorating living conditions.

Notes

[1] According to TV5Monde of December 23, 2017, updated december 24, 2021: "The Crimes against Humanity Pole of the Paris Prosecutor's Office is opening a judicial investigation against the French company Nexa Technologies (formerly Amesys) following the complaint of the International Federation for Human Rights and the Human Rights League. Nexa Technologies is suspected of having participated in the repression operations carried out in Egypt by the al-Sisi regime, through the sale of digital surveillance equipment."

On this occasion, Patrick Baudouin, lawyer and honorary president of FIDH, said: "By selling surveillance equipment and weapons in Egypt and the Middle East, French companies are making record sales. What the authorities don't want to see, as they tolerate or even encourage these sales, is that these regimes obviously make use of their purchases! In Egypt, this material is used by the regime to track, imprison and torture opponents who dare to demand more freedoms and respect for the rule of law. This deadly and criminal trade must end, and justice is there to remind us." (Editorial A l'Encontre)

[2] On January 13, 2022, Human Rights Watch published a report entitled: "Egypt: Systematic and Endless Repression"

(french: <https://www.hrw.org/fr/news/2022/01/13/egypte-une-repression-systematique-et-sans-fin>). (Network. A l'Encontre)

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