



المعهد المصري للدراسات
EGYPTIAN INSTITUTE FOR STUDIES

STRATEGIC
ASSESSMENTS

23 AUGUST 2017

Bright Star Exercise: Dimensions and Interpretations

Mahmoud Gamal



WWW.EIPSS-EG.ORG

[f Eipss.EG](https://www.facebook.com/Eipss.EG) [t Eipss_EG](https://twitter.com/Eipss_EG)

TURKEY- ISTANBUL

Bahçelievler, Yenibosna Mh 29 Ekim Cad. No: 7 A2 Blok 3. Plaza D: 64
Tel/Fax: +90 212 227 2262 E-Mail: info@eis-eg.org



Bright Star Exercise: Dimensions and Interpretations

Mahmoud Gamal*

Introduction

The US military will participate in the 'Bright Star' exercise, after eight-year-suspension, along with forces from Egypt. According to U.S. officials, including U.S. Central Command Spokesman Josh T. Jacques, the Bright Star exercise will take place from Sept. 10 to 20 in Egypt. "Bright Star builds on the strategic security relationship between Egypt and the United States, a historic partnership which plays a leading role in counterterrorism, regional security, and efforts to combat the spread of violent extremism," the U.S. Central Command spokesman said, adding that approximately 200 U.S. military service members will participate in the exercise this year.

First: Bright Star Exercises:

Bright Star is a periodic military exercise between Egypt and the United States, as well as participation of a number of nations. The exercise was initially conducted in 1980 after the Camp David Accord between Egypt and Israel (1979). Bright Star is held every two years under Egyptian-American leadership. This year, 21 nations will participate in Bright Star 2017, including Sudan for the first time in 30 years, according to the Sudanese Defense Ministry. Bright Star will be held at the Mohamed Naguib Military Base in Hammam, Alexandria, which has recently been inaugurated by Egypt's Abdel-Fattah Al-Sisi.

- Bright Star exercise was conducted 13 times, but it was suspended 4 times, as follows:

Executed exercises

1980: Only Egypt and the United States participated in the first exercise, which included units of ground troops from the two countries.

1983: The two nations then committed to organizing the exercise every two years as a result of the increase in size of the participating forces.



1985: Air Force units from the two countries participated in the exercise for the first time.

1987: Forces of the Navy and Special Forces participated for the first time in the exercise.

1989: The exercise this year moved from summer months to autumn months.

1993: The exercise was resumed after a four-year halt.

1995: The number of troops participating in the exercise reached about 60,000, where troops from countries other than Egypt and the United States joined the exercise for the first time.

1997: For the first time, the exercise focused on amphibious warfare, where combat groups and aircraft carriers participated.

1999: The exercise was conducted in October and November, and the number of participating troops reached about 70,000 with 32 observers from different countries. In this exercise, the troops were trained on a scenario of a regional country invaded and controlled by a foreign country, and how to expel the invading forces using the potential of allies and friends.

2001: Approximately 23,000 troops from the United States participated in this exercise.

2005: The exercise took place in August and September.

2007: The exercise was conducted in October and November.

2009: The exercise was conducted in October.

Suspended exercises

The Bright Star exercise was halted more than once for many reasons, including the Gulf War (Operation Desert Shield, Operation Desert Storm, Operation Desert Saber) and the unstable situation in Egypt, as follows:

1991: The exercise was suspended due to participation in the Gulf War.

2003: The exercise was also halted because of the U.S. commitments in the Gulf War.

2011: The exercise was suspended because of the transitional situation that Egypt was experiencing in the wake of the 25 January revolution.



2013: The exercise was cancelled following the military regime's dispersal of the Rabaa and Nahdha sit-ins by force in Egypt.

Second: Bright Star activities:

Bright Star is a joint exercise of about 186 diverse drills involving tactical air, ground, naval and special operations forces field training. The exercise also includes strategic aerial projection, simultaneous sea landing, invading, occupying and securing a number of targets, as well as isolation of enemy reserves, tactical firing, and securing vital targets against sabotage and infiltration.

In the upcoming exercise, U.S. and Egyptian forces only will be engaged in practical training, focusing on counterterrorism operations, detection of planted bombs and mines, border security operations and all critical tasks to combat terrorism in the peninsula of Sinai.

Third: Interpretations and implications of Bright Star resumption:

There are many interpretations for resumption of the Bright Star exercise by Egypt and the United States this year, after eight years of suspension (since 2009), including:

1- The situation in Sinai

Some observers believe that Bright Star 2017 has been resumed to qualify and train the Egyptian army on modern means and methods for confronting militants in Sinai. "The exercise will focus on counterterrorism, key for the battle in the Sinai Peninsula," Foreign Policy magazine said in a report on August 15. "The restart of the biennial Bright Star exercise, a bilateral effort now focused on counterterrorism operations, comes as Egypt struggles to contain a potent insurgency on the Sinai Peninsula," said the FP report. "Cairo has no real peer threat in the region ... Instead, battling Islamist terrorists who have gobbled up parts of the Sinai Peninsula is Cairo's main worry — yet proving a tough task for Egypt's traditionally focused military," the report said. Also, the Foreign Policy report added that within its focus on counterterrorism, the Bright Star exercise this year will deal with detecting and eliminating roadside bombs, and border security operations — all tasks crucial to ending the yearslong insurgency



in Sinai, which has seen the influx of Islamic State fighters and funding over the past two years. The largest group in Sinai, Ansar Beit al-Maqdis, is responsible for dozens of roadside bombs and other attacks, and pledged allegiance to the Islamic State in late 2014. The group currently controls large swaths of the peninsula.”

2- Training Egypt's 777, 999 and 888 military units on 'Urban Warfare':

Informed sources revealed that the exercise will mainly focus on training Unit 777 “counterterrorism”, Unit 999 “combat”, and Unit 888 on urban warfare to confront armed movements within cities in different governorates. Accordingly, the regime will not be relying on the police forces any more in facing those movements.

3- Egyptian-U.S. relations:

Other observers believe that by resuming the Bright Star exercise this year, the U.S. administration under President Donald Trump, wanted to send a message that the US-Egyptian relations returned to normal, after a period of chilled relations during the era of former U.S. administration under Barack Obama, linking resumption of Bright Star with Abdel-Fattah Al-Sisi's visit to the United States in April 2017.

4. 'Bright Star' in response to 'Defenders of Friendship-2016':

Some observers say that the resumption of Bright Star came in response to the Egyptian-Russian rapprochement over the last few years, especially in the military field, including concluded arms deals, and a joint military training for the first time between the Egyptian and Russian armed forces on Egyptian territory, namely, “Defenders of Friendship-2016” joint Russian-Egyptian counter-terrorist exercise, which was described as one of the largest military exercises carried out by the Egyptian army over the last 10 years.

5. Israel Security:

One of the most important priorities of the U.S. administration is to protect Israel's security against any likely threats. Therefore, according to some observers, the U.S. administration provides the Egyptian army with the latest weapons and training techniques amid conflicts and confrontations in the Sinai Peninsula that could threaten Israel in the future.

6- Greater regional role for the Egyptian army:



The Egyptian army to the US military security strategy is a functional army affiliated to the U.S. administration. Accordingly, some observers believe that the resumption of the Bright Star exercise was due to the U.S. administration's intention for authorizing the Egyptian army to perform broader operations in Africa and the Middle East. Therefore, the U.S. works on the rehabilitation of the Egyptian army for the new tasks it will carry out, possibly including the expansion of the Egyptian army's participation in the operations of the peacekeeping forces in Africa.

7- Regular exercises:

This interpretation is based on the fact that Bright Star is a regular exercise since it initially started in 1980. Also, this exercise is on the agenda of the Egyptian army's exercises, and therefore there are no strange implications for its timing and or concerns.

Finally:

The Egyptian army is actually suffering from large losses in individuals and equipment on a monthly basis for its confrontations with militants in Sinai. However, if these armed groups spread over the country, they would cause more suffering and more losses to the Egyptian army due to lack of training and rehabilitation of members of the Egyptian army on "Guerrilla Warfare".

It seems that the United States, under President Donald Trump's administration, is interested in the rehabilitation of some units of the Egyptian army as it previously did with the Iraqi army, training them on "Urban Warfare" to prevent these armed groups from becoming a future threat to the stability of Israel.

* Mahmoud Gamal is an assistant researcher, and supervisor of the Monitoring and Documentation Unit at the Egyptian Institute for Political and Strategic Studies.