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Operation Sirli's Implicit Messages

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Operation Sirli has been a failure both ethically and tactically, with the French government's moral bankruptcy and the Egyptian government's incompetency resulting in nothing but civilian blood on the hands of both.

Last month, Disclose, a French NGO, published an investigation into Operation Sirli, revealing that the Egyptian military had conducted airstrikes against mostly civilian targets using intelligence gathered by a French military team invited to Egypt. The investigation, which was based on hundreds of classified documents, was leaked to Disclose, covering the period between 2016 and 2018.

The investigation gives a colorful picture of the military and political relationship between France and the Sisi regime, including insightful details of the structure and the evolution of the operation and the concerns that it raised in French inner circles. However, a deeper look into the investigation, linking it with the political and geostrategic context of the Middle East, suggests further revelations that weren't mentioned in the Disclose article.

On the Egyptian side, Operation Sirli exposes how deeply incompetent the Egyptian military is at securing their borders, both strategically and tactically. The covert French team that conducted the operation was composed of ten members: four soldiers and six private contractors using one Merlin III airplane to carry out surveillance. It should raise the eyebrow of any security analyst that Egyptians, with all the aid they receive from the US and other countries and the billions they spend (especially after the military coup) still lack the basic capability to survey and monitor their own territory, instead employing the help of a foreign country and exposing more than 70% of Egyptian territory to foreign eyes.

After all, it is well known that the Egyptians have the material capacity to conduct such aerial surveillance. The Egyptian Air Force (EAF) operates a fleet of Beechcraft 1900C ISR aircrafts, some of which were upgraded by Raytheon. EAF is also a long-term operator of Northrop Grumman's E-2C HawKeye 2000, which was used by the Egyptians to strike Libya. Besides those, the Egyptians operate a fleet of Chinese drones which have ISR capabilities. Among those is the Aisheng ASN-209 reconnaissance drone, which the Egyptians owned and have manufactured since 2012. Also, Egypt

operates Wing Loong UAVs, which they obtained in 2016, and have been using in their anti-ISIS campaign in North Sinai.

The above shows that Egypt has the capacity, or at least the tools, to perform its own reconnaissance, but this apparently doesn't translate to optimal outcomes, leading to often embarrassing results for the Egyptians. One example is the killing of a dozen Mexican tourists in what Egypt claimed to be an anti-terror operation in 2015. After all, *something* must have triggered the meeting where the request was submitted by the Egyptian Minister of Defense Sedki Sobhi to his French counterpart Jean-Yves Le Drian. This level of inability and incompetence is not unique to the Western Desert, which acted as the theater for the French operation, but it is well known that the Israelis have been offering reconnaissance and even Israeli strikes to the Egyptians in North Sinai, where a militant insurgency inflicted heavy losses on the Egyptians there. But while attempting to answer the question of why the Egyptians are unable to perform their own reconnaissance goes beyond the scope of this article, it is noteworthy to mention that a claim often charged against the Egyptian army (and other armies in the region) is that they are unable to fully exploit the capabilities of the military assets and equipment available to them, throwing a shadow over the necessities of the massive purchases that Egypt makes (especially from the French), costing the country billions of dollars.

That being said, the most questionable part of the operation is its objective. It would not make sense for the Egyptians to request foreign assistance and kill hundreds of civilians arbitrarily just to stop the flow of smuggled cigarettes and cheap goods into local markets, nor to fight terrorism (as the French labeled the operation). It would make more sense if the operation was aimed at curbing the flow of weapons to the besieged Gaza Strip, which used the chaos in Libya to obtain weapons to use in its fight against Israel. The unwritten alliance between the Israelis and the new military regime in Egypt may have necessitated such an operation, especially as collateral for the possibility of those smuggled weapons falling into the hands of the militants of North Sinai.

One last thing worth noting is that the whole operation failed not simply because, as Disclose described it, there were no active terrorist groups in Egypt's western desert, but because the military regime relied on military means to address the symptoms of a socio-economic problem. The pattern of militarization and the inappropriate use of force has been a characteristic of the way the regime has handled most of the chronic problems in Egypt. Despite this heavy-handed, militarized approach,

the tactics employed have been deficient. There was no attempt to capture, engage with or properly assess the targets, and there was no incorporation of HUMINIT or real-time tracking. They were pure, cold-blooded murders of mostly civilian targets.

On the French side, the investigation reveals a lot. There is first the issue of the morality and ethics of the case according to the criteria of the United Nations General Assembly resolution 56/83 (as explained by Disclose). This is especially true with regard to France's complacency in the illegal executions of Egyptian citizens. The lack of moral integrity shown by the French government in their willingness to participate in such a bloody operation is only matched by the failure of the Egyptians to carry out reconnaissance of their own borders despite having the tools to do so.

However, taking the regional and historical context into account, this cannot just be a single case motivated by the financial benefits of the arms sales to Cairo. While the French were conducting Operation Sirli and aiding the killing of Egyptian civilians, French troops were training and assisting the Libyan warlord Haftar forces in their campaign against Tripoli, which was characterized by indiscriminate killings and massacres against Libyan civilians. The same pattern can be seen in France's operations in the Sahel region and how they operated in the past in Rwanda, Algeria, and many other areas. This trend proposes a real question: Is the colonial legacy that dictated French foreign policy earlier in the previous century a thing of the past, or is it alive and well today within the French political and military establishment?

Morality aside, Operation Sirli exposes the way that France uses terrorism as a cover for its operations. According to the investigation, the Egyptian minister of defense only asked for help securing the borders; it was Le Drian who pledged to set up "operational and immediate cooperation" as a part of a "global maneuver against terrorism". Even if the Egyptians specifically requested an operation to counter terrorism, it was very well known that the military regime accused anyone who opposed them of being a "terrorist threat". It was very remarkable for the French to use terrorism as a cover when targeting civilians, despite the repeat concerns and warnings expressed by the team executing the operation. Another important aspect to note is the hypocrisy of the French regarding the use of mercenaries: to this day, Macron continues to lecture other countries, especially Russia and Turkey, on withdrawing mercenaries from Libya. France contradicted their own supposed values by employing

private contractors from CAE aviation (who Disclose have described as “mercenaries of the sky”) to set up their operations in neighboring Egypt.

Also worth highlighting is the lack of training. The French team continued to supply the Egyptians with intelligence throughout the whole operation – which apparently was still active until 2020 according to some close observers – with no participation from any local partners and no mention of training or weaning off dependence on the French. Despite throwing billions of dollars on the acquisition of arms from Paris, there is little evidence to show any skills acquired or transferred and Operation Sirli is a prime example of this.

Since taking power in 2013, the military regime in Egypt has engaged with many regional and international powers in accordance with domestic and regional agendas. Operation Sirli offers only a glimpse into the dynamics of one of those relationships, and sadly, it leaves behind a blood-stained legacy. Operation Sirli was a tactical and ethical failure; only time will tell if the French government will learn from their failure in the Middle East and cut ties with their colonial past for good.¹

¹ 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.