

French government threatens “national security” charges against journalists who revealed Yemen war arms sales

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The Macron government is threatening to lay charges carrying a five-year jail sentence against journalists who exposed its secret provision of arms for Saudi Arabia’s illegal war in Yemen, in which tens of thousands of civilians have been killed.

On April 15, the journalistic organization *Disclose* published a classified 15-page document prepared last October by the direction of army security for the president and leading ministers. It provided precise information of the use of French arms by Saudi Arabia in Yemen, including tanks, missiles and laser-guiding systems. The document also proved that multiple French officials, including Armed Forces Minister Florence Parly, had repeatedly lied by denying that French arms were being used in this war crime.

Shortly after the report was published, the Macron government summoned three journalists involved in the exposure for questioning by the General Directorate for Internal Security: Geoffrey Livolsi and Mathias Destal, the co-founders of *Disclose*, as well as Benoit Collombat of Radio France.

On May 14, *Disclose* tweeted a statement reporting on the questioning that took place that afternoon in north-western Paris, protesting the far-reaching attack on the freedom of the press by the Macron administration.

According to the statement, the journalists were each informed at the start of their questioning that the investigation was being opened under laws of “terrorism and attack on national security.” “This,” *Disclose* writes, “deprives the *Disclose* journalists of protections guaranteed by the law of 29 July 1881 on the freedom of the press.” The police sought to coerce them into identifying their source.

“The formulation of questions had the singular objective of violating the fundamental protections of the right of the press to secrecy of sources, a critical element of the freedom of the press.” They were questioned about their personal Twitter and Facebook postings, “including some which had no relation to the topic of the interview. Another attempt at

intimidation.”

“Before exercising their right to silence, Mathias Destal and Geoffrey Livolsi therefore declared to the investigators that they were acting in their mission of informing the public,” it said. On May 28, a third *Disclose* journalist, Michel Dispratz, was questioned by the intelligence service.

The Macron administration will likely lay charges against the journalists under an extraordinary, anti-democratic law passed in July 2009, on “security of defense secrets.” It makes it illegal for anyone to come into possession, “destroy,” or “bring to public knowledge” any document deemed by the government to be important to “national security.” It includes a maximum 5 years’ jail term upon conviction, and a 75,000 euro fine.

The Macron government’s actions are part of a drive by capitalist governments around the world—assisted by the state stenographers in the corrupted corporate media—to criminalize whistleblowing and destroy the freedom of the press.

Its sharpest expression is in the persecution of WikiLeaks journalist Julian Assange and whistleblower Chelsea Manning.

The Trump administration, with the support of the Australian and British governments, is seeking to extradite Assange from the UK for having exposed US war crimes in Iraq and Afghanistan, and to try him under the Espionage Act, for which he faces a sentence of 170 years or the death penalty. At the same time, Manning, WikiLeaks’s source, is being held indefinitely in jail in the US for contempt of court, after she refused to testify before a grand jury impaneled to bring further frame-up charges against Assange.

Those political forces and publications, including *Le Monde* in France, that have promoted the slanders used to justify Assange’s persecution, bear responsibility for creating the political environment in which Macron is able to carry out these actions.

The *Disclose* report makes clear that the French government violated international law, including a 2014 European treaty on arms sales, by selling arms with knowledge that they would be used in war crimes. Yet as in the case of Assange and Manning, those facing criminal charges are not the perpetrators of the crime, but the journalists and whistleblowers who exposed it to the population.

Livolsi told the *Intercept* on May 17 that “they want to make an example of us because it’s the first time in France that there have been leaks like this. They want to scare journalists and their sources away from revealing state secrets.”

The Macron government is utilizing the case to make clear that it is completely unaccountable to the population. It says it will not comment on the content of the leaks, which have been read by hundreds of thousands of people, because they are “classified.” Armed Forces Minister Florence Parly gave an interview with BFM-TV host Jean-Jacques Bourdin on May 8, in which the following exchange took place:

Bourdin: Do you have in your possession the 15-page report edited by the direction of military security on the security situation in Yemen?

Parly: I have many reports in my possession.

Bourdin: Do you have this report in your possession? Yes or no?

Parly: It’s a report that I have had in my possession. I am a recipient of this document. I’m even an authorized recipient, in contrast to others, who have procured it, who should not have had it in their possession because they are classified files.

Bourdin: Well, these are journalists who obtained the documents.

Parly: In violation of all the rules and laws of our country.

Bourdin: What does the document say?

Parly: I’m not at all in the habit of commenting on classified notes.

Bourdin: These journalists, Florence Parly, have revealed what is in this note, this confidential document.

Parly: I have nothing to say since, because it’s classified, one can reveal things which are not contained in it.

Bourdin: What they have revealed is not actually in the note?

Parly: I have nothing to say. I’ve said that when one divulges classified documents, one opens oneself up to charges, and it is not the minister of the army,

who I am, who is going to comment in affirming or confirming what is in this note.

Parly spoke before an armed services and national defense commission hearing of the National Assembly on May 7, and not only defended the arms sales to Saudi Arabia, but also declared that the French state must in general be able to sell arms to countries carrying out war crimes.

“Once a war is launched, when our partners use force in a manner that does not appear to us to be compatible with international humanitarian law, we do not hesitate to tell them,” she said. “But should we cease all sales of arms to these countries and interrupt the servicing of equipment that has already been provided? I believe that in this situation, we must exercise our discretion.”

She added: “It would be a serious blow to the reputation of France in the eyes of our clients to give the impression that we may desert our partners mid-way through their journey if we disapprove of such and such actions. In the end, it would disrupt an entire industrial and technological ecosystem in our country, which depends upon our exports contracts.”

These remarks point to the real considerations behind the Macron government’s persecution of the *Disclose* journalists. Having participated in numerous illegal neo-colonial wars over the past 25 years, including the 2011 rape of Libya, the French ruling class is preparing for wars that would involve crimes on a scale that has not been seen in the lifetime of the current generation. It also knows there is mass opposition in the working class to militarism and war and to social inequality and poverty, expressed in the mass “yellow vest” protests over the past six months. It is accordingly building up a police state to suppress any and all opposition.



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