

Secret cables reveal Washington intervened in Italy to defend CIA kidnappers

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The German magazine *Spiegel* reported December 17 that secret US diplomatic dispatches, released by WikiLeaks, reveal how American authorities put pressure on the Italian government to protect CIA agents responsible for kidnapping and torture.

US officials intervened aggressively with the government of Silvio Berlusconi, going so far as to threaten damaged relations between the two countries, to suppress the case against two dozen CIA agents who abducted Egyptian Islamist cleric Hassan Mustafa Osama Nasr, known as Abu Omar, in 2003.

In one of the most widely publicized cases of the illegal US practice of “extraordinary rendition,” Omar was abducted in broad daylight from the streets of Milan, taken to the US Air Force base at Aviano, and eventually transported to Cairo, where he was brutally tortured over the course of 14 months. He claims US agents were present during the abuse and interrogation. The imam was released by Egyptian authorities in 2004, later re-arrested and then released for good in 2007, with no criminal charges ever having been laid. He remains under house arrest.

Italian prosecutor Armando Spataro pieced together the CIA plot against Omar over the course of five years. The investigation led to the indictment of 26 Americans, including CIA and military personnel. Successive Italian governments, however, refused or ignored the prosecutors’ extradition requests.

In November 2009, a Milan judge—in the absence of the defendants—handed down sentences of five years in jail for 21 CIA operatives and a US Air Force officer and a sentence of eight years in prison for the primary organizer of the kidnapping, the former Milan CIA station chief, Robert Lady. Another three American citizens—including Lady’s boss, Jeff Castelli, head of the CIA in Italy in 2003—were acquitted on the grounds

that they enjoyed diplomatic immunity. See: [Italian court convicts US agents in CIA rendition case [6 November 2009] <http://www.wsws.org/articles/2009/nov2009/ital-n06.shtml>]

Spiegel explains that starting in 2007, when the legal proceedings against the CIA kidnappers began in earnest, “the US government tried to intervene—first in Milan and then in Rome—so as to influence the investigations of the public prosecutor’s office.” The documents, reports the German periodical, “provide detailed descriptions of how both the American ambassador and US Secretary of Defense Robert Gates exerted direct pressure on the Italian government in Rome.”

Gates and the US ambassador wanted to be certain that the Berlusconi regime would use its influence to prevent international arrest warrants being issued for the CIA agents accused of involvement in the Abu Omar abduction, the type of arrest warrant issued for Julian Assange of WikiLeaks on phony sexual assault charges.

In May 2006, *Spiegel* reports, the American ambassador “relayed a threatening message: If arrest warrants were in fact issued, it could lead to a drastic deterioration in bilateral relations.” In notes following a conversation with a high-ranking Italian government official, the US ambassador wrote that he had explained that “nothing would damage relations faster or more seriously than a decision by the government of Italy to forward warrants for arrests” of the CIA agents in question.

The Italian government was more than happy to oblige. As *Spiegel* notes, “Even before the Americans started exerting pressure, the Italian government had already been doing all it could to cover up the Abu Omar affair,” in which its intelligence services were

deeply involved. The magazine adds, “Other cables create the impression of a subservient stance on the part of the Italians—to the point that they became active accomplices. With startling frankness, members of the government suggest to the Americans that Italy’s independent judiciary could be easily manipulated.”

Discussions of this highly damaging affair went on at the highest levels. Defense Secretary Gates met with Prime Minister Berlusconi in February 2010 in an effort to obtain immunity for Joseph Romano, a US Air Force officer and one of those convicted in November 2009. According to a cable made public by WikiLeaks, Berlusconi told Gates that he “was working hard to resolve the situation.”

The Italian prime minister also told the Pentagon’s top man that the country’s justice system was “dominated by leftists” and that he had many enemies, especially among the public prosecutors. Berlusconi also predicted that the “courts will come down in our favor” on appeal.

On December 15, an Italian appeals court increased the sentences against the 23 Americans convicted in the abduction. The court added one year to the eight-year term handed down to former CIA station chief Lady and two years to the five-year terms given to the other 22 Americans convicted. The CIA criminals remain at liberty, but run the risk of arrest if they travel to Europe.



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