

Tensions rise between Italy and Egypt over Giulio Regeni murder

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The brutal murder of Italian student Giulio Regeni in Cairo has resulted in an open diplomatic crisis between Egypt and Italy.

On April 8, the government in Rome recalled its ambassador to Egypt. Prime Minister Matteo Renzi said that Italy had a duty to Regeni's family "but also to the dignity of us all" to bring the "genuine truth" to light.

Italian student and journalist Giulio Regeni was tortured to death in Egypt in January in a bestial manner. On January 25, the fifth anniversary of the Egyptian revolution, he disappeared without a trace close to Tahrir Square. Then on February 3, his horrifically disfigured body was found in a ditch by a highway.

To date, Egyptian Interior Minister Magdi Abdel Ghaffar has avoided acknowledging any government involvement in Regeni's murder, but the regime is notorious for torture and murder. Last year, Human Rights Watch wrote of the disappearance of 41,000 people in Egypt. The Muslim Brotherhood alone stated that 29,000 of its members had been arrested.

President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, the gravedigger of the Egyptian revolution, came to power in 2013 after a coup against his predecessor Mohamed Mursi. Since then, police have murdered thousands of regime opponents, thrown tens of thousands in jail, and condemned over a thousand political opponents to death, including the former Islamist president, Mohamed Mursi.

After Regeni's death, Egyptian authorities presented six different explanations. He allegedly died first in a car accident, then of a rape committed by homosexuals, and then in something to do with the drug trade.

Shortly before Easter, Egyptian police suddenly presented Giulio's passport, student cards and bank

cards, together with other objects, which could not however be matched to Regeni. The latest "explanation" states that Egyptian authorities shot four mafia members dressed as policemen who kidnap foreigners to rob them. The objects had been secured in an apartment belonging to the sister of one of the victims.

This "version" is not credible, as it does not explain why Regeni was tortured or why the criminals threw his body in a ditch while retaining his passport and other personal belongings.

These grotesque proceedings were finally exposed to Italian newspaper *La Repubblica* via email by an anonymous, well-connected source. The author of the email described himself as a member of the Egyptian secret police and apparently has detailed knowledge of the case.

From a Yahoo account, he described the events in a mixture of English, Arabic and Italian: "The order to arrest Regeni was given by General Khaled Shalabi, head of the criminal commissariat and the office of investigations in Cairo. He had been carrying out surveillance on Giulio's apartment and ordered national security officers to search it. The General held Regeni for 24 hours after his arrest in the Gizeh barracks."

There, Regeni was asked "about his network of contacts to Egyptian workers' leaders," but he refused to make any statements without the presence of an interpreter or representative from the Italian embassy. He was subsequently brutally beaten. During the night of January 26 to 27, he was transferred "at the orders of interior minister Magdi Abdel Ghaffar...to an office of the national security in Nasr City." The chief of national security was ordered to "make him talk."

In the following 48 hours, Giulio was tortured with

increasing brutality. He was “hit in the face,” then “beaten on the soles of his feet with a stick” and “hung from a door,” he was “subjected to electric shocks on sensitive parts of the body,” and was given “no water, no food, no sleep.” They also “placed [him] naked in a room overflowing with water, which [was] subjected to electric shocks lasting several seconds every 30 minutes.”

The injuries resulting from such torture apparently match those found by the autopsy in Rome. This and several other details were known only to the torturers and Italian investigators, and had not been published anywhere. *La Repubblica* concluded that the author of the anonymous report was credible.

Further details confirm this credibility, such as when the author reports that the secret police in Nasr City subjected the victim to “cuts with a kind of bayonet,” which the autopsy also confirmed.

The transfer to the military intelligence service was decided upon jointly by the interior minister and presidential adviser Ahmad Jamal ad-Din. There, torturers “pressed cigarette butts on his throat and ears,” which would explain why the body was found with its earlobes cut off.

On the day when Italian minister Federica Guidi travelled to Cairo to investigate Regeni’s fate, consultations were held about what should be done with the body. The interior minister, along with Egyptian President Al-Sisi, was personally involved in these discussions. “In the meeting it was decided to portray the incident as a kidnapping with a homosexual background and therefore to throw the body naked in a roadside ditch,” according to the anonymous report.

On 11 April, *La Repubblica* wrote that Giulio’s death had to be finally “described for what it is: a state murder.”

Since February, protests against the cover-up of Regeni’s murder have grown. All of Italy watched as Regeni’s mother, Paola Regeni, reported in a March 29 press conference before the parliament building about the terrible state in which she found the body: “I could only recognise Giulio by the tip of his nose.” She demanded to know the truth and noted that Giulio was not an isolated case.

A petition demanding the uncovering of Giulio’s murder was signed by almost 5,000 academics internationally. Rallies are growing in Italy, blockades

are being held in front of the Egyptian embassy, and the case is being discussed in detail online.

This has put the Italian authorities under pressure. In early April, the government felt compelled to demand rapid clarification from Egypt. Italian officials called for the publication of the mobile telephone records of the victim, surveillance video from metro stations and all forensic data and results. On 5 April, a delegation of high-ranking Egyptian jurists arrived in Rome, but without bringing the material which had been called for.

Three days later, Italian state prosecutor Giuseppe Pignatone stated that the talks with the Egyptians had collapsed without a result. On the same evening, foreign minister Paolo Gentiloni recalled ambassador Maurizio Massari from Cairo “for consultations in Rome,” as it was stated, to “discuss the next steps.”

Italy threatened to place Egypt on a list of dangerous countries for tourists, while the number of Italian tourists in Egypt has already dropped by one tenth. The British government has also demanded a full accounting from the Egyptian government, and the European Parliament discussed whether to halt weapons exports to Cairo.

Nonetheless, Italy does not want to risk its good relations with Egypt. It has steadily expanded economic and political cooperation with the al-Sisi regime. Italy is dependent on Egypt’s cooperation in particular in its preparations for a military intervention in Libya, and annual trade between Italy and Egypt amounts to €5 billion. On April 14, the Italian state prosecutor merely directed an official request for legal cooperation to Egypt.

In addition, Italian energy firm Eni discovered a huge gas field of over 100 square kilometres off the Egyptian coast. Renzi welcomed the find on Twitter with the hashtag, “goodnews.”



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