

Italian court sets out evidence of Egypt's state torture and murder of Giulio Regeni in 2016

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Eight years after 28-year-old Italian doctoral student Giulio Regeni was kidnapped, tortured and killed after disappearing in Cairo on January 25, 2016, four Egyptian security officials have gone on trial in absentia in Rome on charges related to his killing.

Regeni had been carrying out research in Egypt for his doctoral thesis at Cambridge University about independent trade unions. He was found tortured to death nine days after disappearing on the anniversary of the 2011 revolution that toppled the dictator Hosni Mubarak, when security forces were out in force in central Cairo.

It was clear that the top echelons of President Abdel Fattah's al-Sisi's brutal dictatorship were involved in a state abduction and murder. But the imperialist powers, including Britain where Regeni was studying, largely remained silent on his death. They view the junta as a bulwark against another uprising by the Egyptian working class that would trigger mass unrest across the resource-rich Middle East.

The European Union recently granted Egypt an \$8.1 billion "aid package" alongside an additional \$5 billion loan from the International Monetary Fund to shore up the economy of the most important Arab country amid concerns over its "security" and in recognition for his complicity in the genocide of the Palestinians.

Regeni's murder came as the regime prepared to legislate against "independent" unions, with the official state unions—many of them connected to Washington—filing a lawsuit to criminalise unofficial unions, as part of a broader crackdown on workers' rights. The government was also seeking to shut down NGOs receiving overseas funding. Unknown to Regeni, his contacts were secretly reporting back to the local security forces. Prosecutor Sergio Colaiocco said, "Because of this activity, the defendants were erroneously convinced that Regeni was an English spy, sent to give financing to unions close to the Muslim Brotherhood."

Medical evidence presented at the court detailed the horrific torture he had been subjected to, including cuts and bruises from severe beatings and more than two dozen bone fractures to his ribs, fingers and toes, as well as legs, arms and shoulder blades. Regeni had multiple stab wounds on the soles of his feet, slices in his skin made from a sharp object such as a razor blade and several cigarette burns. His shoulder blades bore signs that he had been branded with a large, burning object. He had suffered a brain hemorrhage and a broken cervical vertebra after having his neck twisted or struck, which led to his death.

Regeni was tortured so badly that his mother Paola Deffendi could only recognise him "from the tip of his nose", adding that "all the evil in the world" was inflicted upon her son's body.

The four defendants were named in original court documents as General Tariq Sabir, Colonels Athar Kamel and Uhsam Helmi, and Major Magdi Ibrahim Abdelal Sharif. While they all face charges of kidnapping, Sharif is also charged with inflicting the fatal injuries.

Prosecutors said in their opening statements when the trial began in February this year, before being adjourned for several weeks, that they had evidence that Major Magdi Sharif, from Egypt's General Intelligence, had sent informants to follow Regeni and eventually had him arrested in a Cairo metro station. According to the charge sheet, the Egyptian government admitted to having put the student under surveillance and Sharif, and other unidentified Egyptian officials, then tortured Regeni over several days, causing him "acute physical suffering".

This is the second attempt to try the four men in absentia. Italian judges threw out the first trial in October 2021 on the first day because prosecutors had not officially informed the four suspects of the proceedings. But last September, the constitutional court ruled that the trial could go ahead even without formal notification to

the accused, as Egyptian authorities had refused to cooperate with the court. Tranquillino Sarno, the defence lawyer appointed to represent Kamel, one of the defendants, said, “They are absolutely untraceable.” As a result, he said, even if they were convicted, they would “certainly not serve their sentences.”

That the trial has gone ahead is only due to the perseverance of Regeni’s family and friends, who faced enormous opposition from the Egyptian authorities which presented six different explanations of his death, all equally ludicrous and implausible. The family organized a petition demanding an investigation into Giulio’s murder that was signed by nearly 5,000 academics internationally, and rallies in Italy including blockades held in front of the Egyptian embassy, putting the Italian authorities under pressure to investigate.

El-Sisi’s murderous regime has killed hundreds of political opponents, incarcerated 65,000 political detainees in Egypt’s jails, many without charge or trial, where they are subject to torture, and recently sentenced eight senior opposition leaders to death. Independent media is censored, and international journalists subject to arrest, with *Al Jazeera* journalists detained for years without charges. Above all, it has brutally suppressed all strikes and protests opposing its rule in the service of Egypt’s financial elite.

The Egyptian authorities blocked Italian prosecutors’ efforts to investigate Regeni’s murder at every turn. When Italy sent a team of investigators to Cairo in January 2016, they were forced to run their own investigation rather than work with their Egyptian counterparts. The first autopsy on Regeni’s body in Egypt was conducted without any Italian officials present. CCTV footage from the Cairo metro on the day Regeni disappeared, when eventually released, contained so many gaps as to be useless. In December 2020, Egypt’s prosecutor cleared all four suspects as well as a fifth of responsibility for Regeni’s murder and dropped the case.

Weeks after the first Italian trial was thrown out in 2021, an Italian parliamentary commission found that Egypt’s security agency was to blame for Regeni’s death and accused Egypt’s judiciary of acting in an “obstructive and openly hostile manner” by failing to disclose the whereabouts of the defendants.

When the trial finally began in February, Regeni’s parents and sister stood outside the courtroom with a yellow poster calling for “Truth for Giulio Regeni.” Regeni’s lawyer, Alessandra Ballerini, told reporters, “We had been waiting for this moment for eight years,”

adding, “We hope to be able to finally have a trial against those who have done all the harm in the world to Giulio.”

Regeni’s murder was not the only case to roil Egypt’s relations with Italy, its most important European trading and investment partner. In February 2020, Patrick Zaki, an Egyptian student enrolled on a postgraduate degree at the University of Bologna, was detained on his return to Cairo for a family visit and interrogated under torture about his human rights activities. He was held in Tora Prison and sentenced to three years in jail for “disseminating false news” and “inciting to protest” in July 2023 before being given a presidential pardon by el-Sisi and released the following day.

El-Sisi’s pardon was aimed at securing new trade and investment deals with Italy. Immediately afterwards, fascist Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni telephoned him to “explore some bilateral issues,” following this up with a visit to Cairo last March. The two countries have agreed a \$350 million debt swap programme and an \$89 million partnership investment for agriculture and small-scale projects, as well as signing off on a centre for artificial intelligence (AI) in Cairo, as a jumping off point for AI development and use across Africa.

Last September, Italian energy giant ENI, which operates the offshore Zohr gas field in Egyptian waters and is the largest energy producer in Egypt, announced plans to invest \$7.7 billion in the Egyptian energy sector over the next four years. It follows a pledge by BP to invest \$3.5 billion in Egypt over the next three years, along with its partners.



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