

# European Interest in Egyptian Stability: The Case of Italy

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Relations between European countries and Middle East and North Africa (MENA) states have always been overwhelmingly dominated by strategic and security priorities, including migration control, the fight against terrorism, and access to energy.<sup>1</sup> The so-called Arab Spring has generated prolonged chaos in many of the local Arab states, with dramatic consequences for the northern side of the Mediterranean as well. Foremost among these is the refugee crisis, which is so significant in numbers and so difficult to handle that it undermines relations between the European Union member states as well as the very existence of the organization. Indeed, the fact that many countries are reinstating national borders and reconsidering the Schengen agreement has led some to hypothesize that the entire European project is in jeopardy, demonstrating that the migration crisis is not just a challenge to the organization's stability of the EU but an existential threat to the EU.<sup>2</sup>

In these circumstances, support of those Middle East and North African states that have somehow preserved their stability becomes a vital interest for EU member states, which have demonstrated their readiness not only to sacrifice parts of their democratization projects in the area but also to ignore issues of international credibility as they reveal how little leverage on local governments they actually have.

A dramatic example of this phenomenon is the story of the relations between Italy and Egypt following the murder of Giulio Regeni, the Italian researcher who was allegedly kidnapped and tortured to death by the Egyptian secret services in early 2016. The fact that the ensuing diplomatic

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standoff between the two countries was relatively brief shows how “the relations between Italy and Egypt go far beyond the traditional forms of cooperation.”<sup>3</sup> Indeed, Rome’s economic and security ties with Egypt are essential, rather than merely important for the prosperity and stability of the country.

The purpose of this paper is to analyze the evolution of relations between Italy and Egypt after the murder of Giulio Regeni and the interests behind the relatively quick resolution of the crisis. While this case had severe consequences for Italian and European public opinion, it alone cannot generate valid generalization about the state of broader European-MENA relations. Still, it does give a sense of how crucial the issue of migration is for European politicians and the price they are willing to pay in order to contain that issue.

## Background

Giulio Regeni was a PhD student at Cambridge University’s Girton College, researching independent Egyptian independent trade unions. Regeni disappeared in Cairo on January 25, 2016, the fifth anniversary of the 2011 Tahrir Square protests. His mutilated and half-naked corpse was found in a ditch alongside the Cairo-Alexandria highway on February 3, 2016. The body showed signs of extreme torture, with contusions, abrasions, cuts, broken ribs, cigarette and more extensive burns, multiple stab wounds, a brain hemorrhage, and a broken cervical vertebra, which ultimately caused his death. Giulio Regeni’s murder has been attributed to his supposed ties with the Egyptian Independent Trade Union Movement, which was opposed to the central government of President Abdel Fatah el-Sisi.

The case triggered a heated debate throughout the world but particularly in Italy, because of the suspected involvement, partial or total, of the Egyptian secret services in his death. The suspicions were aggravated by the Egyptian authorities’ behavior during the investigation of the affair. At the very outset, the Egyptian authorities declared that Giulio Regeni died as a result of a car accident. By March 2016, however, the Egyptian Ministry of Foreign Affairs announced that Regeni’s four kidnappers had been killed by the Egyptian police. According to the authorities, Regeni was killed by a gang of professional kidnappers wearing police uniforms. As evidence, they claimed that they found Regeni’s documents after the shooting in the house of one of the criminals.<sup>4</sup> The Italian investigators never believed this version because of several gaps in it and because the Egyptian

authorities changed the story several times.<sup>5</sup> Finally, phone records placing the leader of the gang more than 100 km from Cairo at the time of Regeni's disappearance proved that the government's scenario was not viable.<sup>6</sup>

Regeni's murder was more likely related to the fact that independent labor unions are a particularly sensitive issue in Egypt under the Sisi government, which views them as having been a key galvanizing force in the 2011 revolution. Many democracy advocates in and outside Egypt, including Giulio Regeni and his Cambridge supervisor, Egyptian political scientist Dr. Maha Abdel Rahman, regarded this as a positive force, with the potential to strengthen civil society, democratic participation, and workers' rights – elements that seem threatening to a military regime determined to repress autonomous sources of power.<sup>7</sup>

From a wider perspective, Regeni could be considered one of the victims of the government repression intended to eliminate internal dissent in Egypt. Since the armed forces ousted President Morsi in July 2013, tens of thousands of people have been detained without trial or sentenced to prison terms or to death, often after trials of dubious legitimacy. By the government's own admission, in 2016, 34,000 persons (and possibly thousands more) were behind bars.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, the draconian new counter-terrorism law prompted the response by the authorities after the rise in violent attacks by armed groups against the police, army, judicial officials, foreign nationals, and ordinary citizens, which followed the Morsi's government crackdown. Egypt has also seen the emergence of a new pattern of human rights violations against political activists and protesters, including students and children, hundreds of whom have been arbitrarily arrested, detained, and subjected to enforced disappearance by state agents. Those detained in this way did not have access to their lawyers or families and were held incommunicado and without judicial oversight. Local NGOs allege that an average of three to four people are abducted and arbitrarily subjected to enforced disappearance every day.<sup>9</sup> This pattern of abuse has become evident since March 2015, when President el-Sisi appointed Major General Magdy Abd el-Ghaffar as Minister of Interior. Before assuming this post, Abd el-Ghaffar held senior positions in the State Security Investigations (SSI), the secret police force that became notorious for serious human rights violations under Mubarak, and in the National Security Agency (NSA), formed to replace the SSI when the authorities bowed to public pressure and in March 2011 announced its dismantlement. Since the appointment of the new minister, the NSA has emerged as the principal state agency engaged in suppressing opposition

to the government and committing torture and other “serious human rights violations with impunity.”<sup>10</sup> According to Amnesty International, “Given this cycle of widespread abuse and government denial, the abduction and murder of Italian doctoral student Giulio Regeni in early 2016 raised suspicion that he may have been a victim of enforced disappearance who died under torture while detained by Egyptian state agents.”<sup>11</sup>

### **Diplomatic Stalemate and Resolution of Italian-Egyptian Crisis**

Italy’s major diplomatic action against Egypt was to recall its ambassador to Egypt, Maurizio Massari, on April 8, 2016. This decision was made immediately after a failed meeting between Italian and Egyptian investigators.<sup>12</sup> In the weeks preceding the meeting, the Italian authorities had asked for numerous materials from the investigation, but the Egyptian authorities presented only 30 pages of documents out of the more than 2000 requested. In particular, Italy had asked for phone records; Egypt’s assistant state prosecutor Mostafa Suleiman stated that providing them would violate the Egyptian constitution.<sup>13</sup> The Italian investigators likewise demanded CCTV footage of the area where Regeni had disappeared, but Suleiman said that by then the footage had been automatically deleted. The Egyptian authorities did not even hand out their own autopsy report.<sup>14</sup>

As a consequence of the failed meeting, then-Italian Minister of Foreign Affairs Paolo Gentiloni recalled Massari to Italy, officially for “consultation purposes,” but essentially as a diplomatic tactic to put pressure on Egyptian authorities with the international crisis that developed after Regeni’s murder. A similar measure was taken in February 2014 by then-Italian Minister for Foreign Affairs Federica Mogherini in the so-called “Marò case,” when India kept postponing the trial for the two navy riflemen, Salvatore Girone and Maurizio Latorre, accused of killing two Indian fishermen.<sup>15</sup>

In response, between August and September 2016, the Egyptian government agreed to hand over mobile phone records from both the area where Regeni had last been seen and the place where his body was found.<sup>16</sup> Then, and more significantly, during a visit to Rome in early September, Egyptian prosecutors admitted for the first time that Regeni had been under police surveillance before his disappearance (though they insisted that the checks on him lasted only three days). This admission followed the publication of an interview with Mohammed Abdullah, leader of the independent street vendors’ union and the most important primary source for Regeni’s research, who revealed that he had personally denounced

Regeni to the authorities because he considered Regeni's questions to be "not about street vendors." The Egyptian government said that as a result of Abdullah's tip, it placed Regeni under investigation, but decided after a few days that his research was of "no interest to national security."<sup>17</sup>

In late January 2017, the Egyptian police agreed to make available for analysis by Italian and German experts the footage recorded in the Dokki Metro station in Giza, where Regeni had been seen for the last time.<sup>18</sup> Then, on August 14, 2017, after the Egyptian public prosecutor's office sent to its counterpart in Rome some material about interviews with the policemen who had first investigated Regeni's murder, the Italian government announced its decision to send a new ambassador, Giampaolo Cantini, to Cairo. Officially, the government justified its decision by citing the improved cooperation between the Egyptian and the Italian prosecutors' offices. Yet according to several media, the renewed ambassadorial-level ties were the result of the "realpolitik" efforts of the Ministers of the Interior (Marco Minniti), Defense (Roberta Pinotti), and Foreign Affairs (Angelino Alfano).<sup>19</sup>

After the return of the Italian Ambassador to Cairo in September 2017, Ibrahim Metwaly Hegazy, the founder of the Association of the Families of the Disappeared (an association that provides information to the Egyptian Commission for Rights and Freedoms, a Cairo-based NGO-ECRF) and the Regeni's family lawyer in Cairo, was arrested and charged with "managing an illegal group, spreading false news ... [and] cooperating with foreign organizations."<sup>20</sup>

On November 2, 2017, the Egyptian lead in the investigation into Regeni's case seems to have been dropped in favor of a new one. Following the publication of an article by the newspaper *La Repubblica*, Italian magistrates issued a European Investigation Order requesting to interview Dr. Rahman, Regeni's supervisor at the university, who insisted on focusing Regeni's research on independent trade unions in Egypt, despite the fact that he had expressed concerns and fears about the direction his research was taking.<sup>21</sup> This Investigation Order appears to be the final chapter of a diplomatic stalemate between the two countries, which was apparently never intended to last very long.

### **Italy and Egypt: Unavoidable Ties**

Italy and Egypt always enjoyed a close and cooperative relationship before the Regeni case cast a shadow over it. As stated by Claudio Pacifico, a former Italian ambassador to Egypt, the relations between Rome and Cairo "go far

beyond the traditional forms of cooperation”: Egypt is Italy’s main partner on the other side of the Mediterranean Sea and its role is essential to Italy both for business and security reasons. Moreover, after the outbreak of the refugee crisis, maintaining good relations with that country has become even more vital to Italy.

Italian economic interests in Egypt range from trade through investment opportunities to access to energy. Egypt is Italy’s main trading partner in North Africa,<sup>22</sup> and trade volume between the two countries rose by 30 percent to 1.3 billion euros in the first quarter of 2017.<sup>23</sup> For Italy, Egypt is the sixth largest export market in the MENA region and the thirty-second in the entire world.<sup>24</sup> Since 2014, the volume of Italian exports to Egypt has risen consistently, and given the estimated potential increase in exports from Italy to Egypt, by 2020 is projected to amount to 474.1 million euros.<sup>25</sup>

In addition, Italian investments in the country are considerable. In 2016, Italy was the largest European source of Foreign Direct Investment in Africa, and Egypt ranks third among African countries that received Italian investments; over the last seventeen years it has ranked fourth in this category.<sup>26</sup> The Italian business presence in the country is large: 957 out of the 3500 Italian companies in the MENA region are located in Egypt.<sup>27</sup> Among them, ENI, the main Italian energy company, is the biggest investor. In 2015, ENI’s investments in the Zohr gas project alone accounted for \$6 billion out of a total of \$7.4 billion Italian FDI in Egypt.<sup>28</sup> Moreover, Italy is one of Europe’s most energy-vulnerable countries, which makes ENI, in the words of the former Italian Prime Minister Matteo Renzi, “a fundamental piece of Italian energy policy, foreign policy and intelligence policy.” ENI’s chief executive Claudio Descalzi knows the leaders of many countries better than do Italy’s ministers. Thus, as the pressure to solve Regeni’s murder mounted, Descalzi gave assurances that the Egyptian authorities were “putting in maximum effort” to find Regeni’s killers.<sup>29</sup> Beside ENI, there are many other important Italian companies that have invested significant capital in the country, including Banca Intesa San Paolo (which in 2006 bought the Bank of Alessandria), Italcementi, Pirelli, Italgas, Danieli Techint, Gruppo Caltagirone, Alpitour, and Valtur. This presence is expected to increase because, according to forecasts, steady economic and population growth make Egypt a promising investment opportunity even for small and medium-size enterprises.<sup>30</sup>

No less significant is the fact that Italian-Egyptian security cooperation plays a crucial role in the relations between the two countries, in particular

with regard to immigration. Indeed, Egypt is considered the best Northern African partner for Italy in the fight against illegal immigration. This cooperation is framed by several agreements, including one providing for the speedy expulsion of illegal Egyptian immigrants from Italy.<sup>31</sup> Since 2013, the number of migrants landing in Italy has grown significantly because of the upheavals in the MENA region, and these agreements became more vital for the Italian government. Indeed, even if only 7 percent of the migrants landing in Italy in 2016 actually left from Egypt, the country plays a wider role of migration containment because of its harsh laws against human traffickers.<sup>32</sup> Moreover, most of the migrants apprehended in Egypt are detained in camps indefinitely; when not subjected to forced expulsion, their only option is to go back to their country at their own expense.<sup>33</sup>

Finally, and more crucially, Italy's relationship with Egypt is essential for the stabilization of Libya, which is Rome's single most important foreign policy objective. Indeed, Libya has been the state from which most of the migrants landing in Italy departed in recent years, because it is the embarkation point for refugees, more than 180,000 in 2016, arriving by sea. In August 2017, the Italian Navy launched a mission to support the Libyan Coast Guard in fighting human trafficking. Since then, the number of migrants landing on the Italian coast from Libya has dropped significantly (by 30.13 percent, from 2016 to 2017).<sup>34</sup> Yet Libya is still divided between two competing governments and Khalifa Haftar, the military commander of the eastern government, could impede effective cooperation. Indeed, when the agreement between the Italian government and the titular Libyan Prime Minister Fayeze al-Sarraj was signed, Haftar accused the government in Tripoli of betraying the Libyan people, menacing the implementation of the agreement itself. In this context, Egypt has an important role to play because despite recognizing al-Sarraj as the legitimate Prime Minister of Libya, Cairo provides technical, logistical, and economic support to Khalifa Haftar in his efforts to confront the Islamists. The friendly relationship between Haftar and Egypt could help facilitate the effective operation of the Italian naval mission in Libya.<sup>35</sup> Thus in the words of former NATO ambassador to Italy Stefano Stefanini before the diplomatic crisis was resolved, "We ideally need as much regional diplomacy in Libya as possible, and the Regeni case is a stumbling block."<sup>36</sup>

## Conclusion

The return of the Italian ambassador and the normalization of ties following the Regeni case underscore the prioritization of economic and security cooperation over support for human rights and the rule of law.<sup>37</sup> Indeed, Italian policy toward the MENA countries has historically privileged economic and security ties over human rights. Despite the fact that for the first time the Italian government has been forced to answer public concerns about its dealings with the Egyptian government, it is unlikely that Italian policy in the region will change.<sup>38</sup>

Nor is Italy alone. Germany seems to follow the same path. For example, in 2011 a number of foreign NGOs, including Konrad Adenauer Stiftung (associated with Chancellor Angela Merkel's Christian Democratic Union party) were raided by the Egyptian police, and in 2013, an Egyptian court froze the assets of the organizations and found some NGO workers guilty of receiving "illegal financing from abroad." Germany has paid a 250,000 euro bond for each worker in order to circumvent the ban on leaving the country imposed on them, and the relationship between the two countries has been affected by a crisis that still needs to be resolved. Nonetheless, Chancellor Merkel said very little about Egypt's controversial NGO law during her 2017 meeting with President el-Sisi, and gave higher priority to the effort to cut a deal to curb the flow of migrants from Africa.<sup>39</sup> The same is true for the European Union more generally. Indeed, the new European Neighborhood Policy (ENP), revised in November 2015, acknowledged the importance of sustained efforts in support of democracy, human rights, fundamental freedoms, and the rule of law, but aimed to focus on the stabilization of the partner countries as the main political priority.<sup>40</sup> Overall, the EU sees Egypt as a "first line of defense" against illegal migration and consequently makes little attempt to exercise leverage over the country.

At the same time, the repression that helps preserve stability in Egypt could, over the long term, turn into a driver of chaos if abuses of power go unquestioned and people's expectations go unmet.<sup>41</sup> The consequences of such a scenario would not only affect migration flows toward Europe but the stability of the entire region. Still, migration is one of the most urgent concerns of European voters and it plays an undeniable role in the shaping of electoral campaigns throughout Europe.<sup>42</sup> The fact that leaders' ability to tackle immigration influences the outcome of elections in many EU countries makes a scenario in which European politicians choose to promote policies based on long term considerations over short term ones

unlikely. This seems to be the major reason why Italy, along with other EU member states, is likely to shape its relationship with Egypt according to short term security considerations rather than on long term issues. After all, to win the elections today, Egypt's precarious stability is enough; possible long term consequences will probably be someone else's problem.

## Notes

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