

Diplomacy Between Italy and Egypt at a Low Point

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Brief Analysis

Italian-Egyptian relations are once again at a low point, this time for the detention of Egyptian citizen Patrick Zaki—a student of an Italian university—and the question of what role foreign powers in general, and Italy in particular, can play in stopping human rights abuses in Egypt.

In early 2020, Patrick George Zaki was arrested at Cairo's International Airport and detained at Tora prison by Egyptian authorities. At the time of his arrest, Zaki was an Erasmus Mundi recipient at the Italian University of Bologna pursuing a master's degree in Women and Gender Studies. He was also a human rights advocate with the well-known Egyptian NGO Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights (EIPR).

In late April 2021, after Zaki had spent more than 450 days in prison, the majority of the Italian Senate voted in favor of granting Zaki Italian citizenship in order to demand his immediate release and extradition under Italian law. Now, the only barrier between Zaki and Italian citizenship is the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which believes this decision could be counterproductive for Zaki's case as it further questions his ties with Italy. If Italy's Foreign Minister Di Maio shifts gears and approves the citizenship, the Italian central government would have significant pressure to push for Zaki's immediate release.

The entire incident raises the question of why Patrick Zaki has been detained in the first place. After landing in Cairo on February 7, 2020, for a holiday vacation to visit friends and family, Zaki was immediately captured at the airport. Little is known about what happened to him in the following 24 hours, but the day after his arrest, Egyptian officials formalized the detention. The authorities accused Zaki of anti-government propaganda on social media and terrorism, and they underlined his ties with the EIPR. All accusations have been rejected by Zaki, his lawyers, and human rights defenders, who also claim Egyptian authorities manufactured the online evidence.

Zaki was only able to meet his lawyers during his first day of trial, held in July 2020, where, according to [Amnesty International \(https://www.amnesty.it/appelli/liberta-per-patrick/\)](#), he seemed visibly shaken and exhibited signs of torture. However, his trial is still pending, and the Egyptian judiciary system has been keeping him in preventive custody under terrorism charges with no possibility of meeting his lawyers or family.

In early December 2020, three other members of the EIPR—who had been detained at Tora as well—were set free by the Egyptian authorities. While many were hopeful that this would also allow for Zaki's release, he remains in prison five months later, and at present it is unclear whether Zaki's case still stands on accusations relevant to his work with EIPR or is based on some undisclosed accusation.

For many Italians, this case is particularly concerning as it is not the first time an Italian student or national has been imprisoned in Egypt and questioned about his or her ties with the Italian government or human rights work. The case of Giulio Regeni, a former Ph.D. candidate at Cambridge University and Italian citizen, still haunts Italy as a moment of failed Italian foreign policy. Regeni was kidnapped, tortured, and killed in 2016, allegedly by Egyptian Secret Service Officers—though due to the lack of cooperation with Egyptian authorities, those responsible have not been prosecuted. Regeni's homicide sparked significant international reactions and set a precedent in how Italy manages such incidents with Egypt.

Italy failed to initiate cooperation with Egypt as soon as Regeni's body was found with undeniable signs of torture, and Italy consequently failed in taking a firm stand against Egypt's intransigence in investigating the crime or prosecuting the perpetrators. At the time, Italy's foreign policy relied on trusting the Egyptian government, even if the Italian government was well aware of the Egypt's continuous human rights violations and the likelihood that Egypt would cover the crime, which did indeed occur. Only after the appearance of proof of manufactured evidence and pressures from various organizations such as Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International did Italy change its strategy slightly, opting for a more autonomous and steady approach.

Notwithstanding the different circumstances between the Regeni and Zaki cases, they are bound together by the fact that an Italian student in Egypt experienced a massive violation of his human rights. These are resemblances that members of the European Union (EU) evaluated and have decided to act on, pushing for the introduction of sanctions against Cairo—though sanctions are not yet in place.

However, the European Parliament has adopted a text on [“The deteriorating situation of human rights in Egypt, in particular the case of the activists of the Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights \(EIPR\).” \(https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2020-0384_EN.pdf\)](#) highlighting how *“The human rights situation in Egypt has continued to deteriorate as authorities intensify their crackdown on civil society, human rights defenders, health workers, journalists, opposition members, academics and lawyers, and continue to brutally and systematically repress any form of dissent[...].”* What is happening to Zaki is clearly not a one-time abuse, but is rather part of a long-term human rights deterioration period happening in Egypt.

Considering what the EU text declares, Italy should be the first EU member to adjust its bilateral relations with the Egyptian government, and perhaps even cut them

off completely until Zaki is released. Until now, relations between the two have not shifted drastically in response to Zaki's detention, though the country has exercised considerable diplomatic efforts to secure Zaki's release. Undoubtedly, diplomatic ties are at their lowest, but the Italian Ambassador to Cairo is still sitting—Rome withdrew its ambassador after Regeni was killed—and the Italian government still furthers economic and trade relations with Egypt.

Much of this is due to the interrelated nature of Italy's relations with other Mediterranean states. As the [Italian Chamber of Deputies reported in June 2020](https://www.camera.it/leg18/1058?idLegislatura=18&tipologia=audiz2&sottotipologia=audizione&anno=2020&mese=06&giorno=18&idCommissione=77&numero=0011&file=indice_stenografico) (https://www.camera.it/leg18/1058?idLegislatura=18&tipologia=audiz2&sottotipologia=audizione&anno=2020&mese=06&giorno=18&idCommissione=77&numero=0011&file=indice_stenografico) in a briefing paper discussing former Italian Prime Minister Conte's phone call with the sitting Egyptian President al Sisi, "*Italy sits in a disadvantaged position*" as maintaining relations with Cairo is inevitable given their proximity and trade.

Italy cooperates with Egypt on a daily basis simply because of their respective geographical positions. Plus, some of Italy's largest companies work in Egypt, as for example ENI (<https://www.eni.com/it-IT/presenza-globale/africa/egitto.html>), the leading foreign oil operator in Egypt that works in the field of exploration, extraction, and production of hydrocarbons and liquefaction of natural gas. For this reason, it is impossible for the Italian government to cut off every tie with Egypt, or even impose sanctions, as it would disrupt long-lasting economic partnerships and cause possible retaliation.

Italy also has a fixed and generally unchangeable foreign policy in the Mediterranean—especially in the East, which includes Cyprus, Egypt, Greece, and Turkey. This foreign policy agenda is a way for Italy to prove autonomy and act as a bridge, in terms of trade, relations, and negotiations, between the Eastern Mediterranean and Europe.

However, as a report by the [Italian Institute for International Political Studies \(https://www.ispionline.it/en/pubblicazione/italy-eastern-mediterranean-between-continuity-and-new-challenges-27357\)](https://www.ispionline.it/en/pubblicazione/italy-eastern-mediterranean-between-continuity-and-new-challenges-27357) (ISPI)—a well-known independent and international think tank based in Milan, Italy—highlighted, "*these attempts to raise its profile [Italy] within the international community have brought limited results for a number of reasons: a clear objective-capability gap, unfortunate diplomatic misjudgments and constant domestic political divisions.*" Fundamentally, Italy's agenda has often been incompatible with those of greater powers acting in the region and has thus failed to succeed or take independent decision with positive outcomes.

Despite this unsuitability, the Italian central government never considered a political foreign policy shift, mainly because—as reported by ISPI— "*Italian policymakers likely consider preventing an escalation in the Eastern Mediterranean as the country's best policy option. This approach to a crisis also fits well with the traditional Italian self-perception as middle-power, which means that Rome believes that it cannot take the political initiative in the Eastern Mediterranean without the US or other EU states.*" If one applies this consideration to Italy's strategy on Egypt, especially to the Zaki and Regeni cases, this characterization appears to fit perfectly.

As of today, while Italy has not made changes to its overall foreign policy with Egypt, it is employing major diplomatic efforts to prompt the release of Patrick Zaki, including sending Italian judges to the country, meeting with high officials, pressuring President Sisi through the Italian Embassy, and unifying the EU in the same direction. Approving the motion for Italian citizenship is indeed a big step forward for Italian policymakers because it demonstrates strong domestic interest and a unified position against Egypt—a stand Italy did not take in the Regeni case.

Nevertheless, the Italian government should not keep its moral standpoint separated from its foreign policy, especially as many Italians see the homicide of Giulio Regeni as a demonstration of how this strategy has failed. Politics and morality should be on the same agenda, especially when there is proof of human rights abuse. Providing Italian citizenship to Zaki is just the first step; pushing for Zaki's release in a serious and effective manner will be the second. Extradition will be hard, as the Italian government will need to act as a unified front—a rare occurrence. The international and European community can help by encouraging this process and seeing this opportunity as a way to advance democracy and human rights protection in Egypt.

As Italy examines its next steps in the case of Patrick Zaki and its relations with Egypt, it is also important to remember that Patrick Zaki and Giulio Regeni are only two of the thousands of people who have been detained by the Egyptian government on vague charges or for criticizing the government. Another European student, University of Vienna scholar Ahmed Samir Santawy is, in fact, currently facing Zaki's same fate. It is important for Italy, and for all, to address the many violations of human rights in Egypt. If these human rights abuses continue unchecked, it will be difficult to avoid future scenarios similar to that of Giulio Regeni and many others.

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