

# The Egyptian Police, Between Innocence and Guilt in the Regeni Case

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## Articles & Testimony

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On the afternoon of this past January 24th, while Egypt was preparing for the fifth anniversary of the January 25 Revolution, the young Italian academic researcher Giulio Regeni disappeared in the middle of Cairo. His body turned up several days later, tossed near a security outpost on a desert road in Giza with grotesque marks of torture on it, raising pressing questions as to who killed him.

The story of this Italian youth's violent death has caused a storm inside and outside Egypt, casting a shadow on Egyptian-Italian relations and raising doubts about the safety of foreigners in Egypt. The incident pushed the European Parliament to direct extremely sharp criticism at Egypt, with intimations of the responsibility of the Egyptian security apparatus for the torture and killing of Regeni. It is suggested that the bases of European-Egyptian partnership should be reexamined and a ban imposed on the export of arms and security material to Egypt. These and other dire repercussions are threatening the stability of the relationship between Egypt and the European Union.

Investigations are still ongoing up to today, with the possibility of Egyptian police involvement in the incident. This is the possibility that the majority of security, human rights, and journalistic treatments taking up the case believe to be true, in Egypt and in Italy, notwithstanding the speed with which Egyptian investigate agencies have presented alternative scenarios distancing themselves from suspicion. The latest of these is the dissemination of testimony from one of the witnesses who stated that he had seen the deceased arguing with one of his Italian fellow-citizens near the Italian consulate in central Cairo on the day of his disappearance.

We shall not try in this article to answer the chief question – “How was Regeni killed, and who killed him?” – inasmuch as we shall seek instead to answer another question: “Why are the Egyptian police always at the center of the circle of suspicion? And why are they beset by pointing fingers accusing them of being implicated and involved in cases such as this?”

Certainly this suspicion can be justified. If from the first moment eyes were turned to the Egyptian police to reveal the fate of the Italian youth, there are several reasons for this. We can summarize them as follows.

First, Regeni's killing coincides with a notable escalation in the pattern of abuses against Egyptian citizens – abuses

which have been admitted by several figures from the police leadership and by the Ministry of Interior. These have been deemed the isolated and merely “individual” practices of some transgressors within the security apparatus – which opens the door to the possibility that that one of those “individual” transgressors is the murderer of Regeni.

Second, the record of the Egyptian police has been tied to killings in detention centers in recent years, of which human rights groups have documented 65 cases – entailing death by torture – since the start of this year. In just one police department, in the Al-Matariyyah area of eastern Cairo, eleven cases of deaths have been registered in the precinct’s detention center.

Third, the death of the Italian coincides with two infamous cases of killings now being heard before the Egyptian judiciary. The first is the killing, following torture, of a citizen by police officers in Luxor governorate. The officers attempted to deny any connection to the case in order to distance themselves from suspicion, leading to protests within the governorate and ending with the surrender of the officers for trial. The second incident is the killing by a police deputy (a position equivalent to a police officer’s aide) of a driver in the Red Road area of Cairo, which also led to protest by relatives and the perpetrator’s surrender to the courts. This case also led to the consideration of legislative amendments covering police officers’ subordinates. And let’s not forget the assault on doctors inside hospitals, and the attempt to haggle the victims into foregoing court cases against the policemen involved in those attacks.

Fourth, there is the sensitivity of the information being circulated about the victim, i.e., that he was acting as Cairo correspondent for an Italian newspaper, given what has been documented in this sphere by human rights organizations. Among these we note the Association for Free Thought and Expression, which has compiled some 184 cases of security-force abuses against journalists and foreign correspondents in Egypt over the last four years. Sixty-four of these were cases of physical assault and injuries, 68 cases of detention and seizure of journalists and foreign correspondents, four cases of rape and apparently sexual assault, 14 cases of seizure and destruction of photography equipment, and six cases of photographs being prohibited.

Fifth, there is the autopsy report for the Italian youth, which revealed intensive torture: broken ribs, ears cut off, and neck broken, along with marks of cigarettes extinguished on the body, not to mention subjection to electric shocks. This report closely resembles other reports about cases of Egyptians who met their deaths at police detention sites which the judiciary has examined or is still examining. The marks of torture are also in line with the accounts of many detainees about the use of particular methods and techniques to force them to confess, or as punishment, in police departments’ detention sites.

In criminology there are what are called the rules of suspicion, meaning roughly the first step to be taken in investigating any crime. You don’t need to be a police officer or an expert in criminology to be aware of this – it’s enough that you’ve had some experience observing the conduct of an investigative officer in the case of some crime, or have seen a detective film.

When a crime happens in your neighborhood, a killing or a robbery, the team of investigators mobilizes immediately after it is reported on several fronts, one part of these being examining the scene of the crime, picking up fingerprints, and inquiring about the victim of the crime – his relationships, his enemies, his behavior. The other part has to do with chasing down suspects, scrutinizing those known within the bureau or department offices to specialize in this kind of crime, and so on in the same vein.

In every police department or bureau of special investigation in Egypt, there is a registry of individuals recorded according to their criminal classifications, from novice delinquent to habitual offender to dangerous criminal. In the event that a witness to the incident is located, you will find an album of suspects from among those habituated to this crime, or a line-up of some of them to facilitate identification of the true suspect among them by the eyewitnesses.

By this logic, and recalling past observations, the placement of the Egyptian police – or one of its teams or branches or departments – in the dock of the accused, ranked as first or primary suspect in the killing of the Italian youth, becomes logical and licit, resting on clear bases for suspicion in the accused's history and his "priors" in similar cases.

Here we are speaking only about suspicion; we are not pronouncing on the involvement of the police force or one of its arms or members in the crime – nor do we rule it out, especially as investigations are still ongoing. But any investigator of this case – acting purely professionally, removed from political concerns – cannot eliminate the police from the circle of suspicion. Indeed, he must regard police involvement as one of the possibilities that must be followed up and worked through. Especially when he has before him the body of a youth marked by various forms of torture – ears cut off, ribs and neck vertebrae broken, subjected to electrocution, and more – and he is aware that these police are gravely suspected in crimes such as this by virtue of their black record. Their fingerprints are on similar cases that closely resemble this one.

Perhaps you ask yourself: "Is it possible that an Egyptian policeman would do such a thing?" Most likely you find nothing which confirms the matter, though you also find nothing which disproves it. But surely you find something to support the suspicion, of course without disregarding the rule "Innocent until proven guilty."

Some say there is no sane policeman who would attack a foreigner, knowing the political sensitivity of that act, notwithstanding that those who attacked the doctors, and those who killed the merchant in Luxor, and the driver in Red Road, also did not appreciate the political consequences of their actions.

Thus suspicion becomes natural, or even logical. For the police in Egypt are paying the price for their history, for not adopting a clearly proclaimed program to break with the sins of their wicked past, placing them at the forefront of those suspected in every incident. This is to say nothing of the serious extent of their loss of trust, or of the institution's need to reform its house from within, in the interest of the kind of professional performance that works diligently to correct its mistakes instead of covering them up.

One of the keys to the solution is legislative amendments of the sort that some Egyptian media have talked about, since the Ministry of Interior has introduced them into the Police Law, paving the way to send them to Parliament. These would ensure insistence on the proper rules for dealing with citizens, not bearing police arms outside of working hours, and immediate reporting of individual transgressions to the public prosecutor's office, among other articles. But Egyptians will always believe – by the force of their experience amidst a frightful quantity of ineffective laws and constitutional articles – that formulation of laws alone is not enough, and that the important thing is their implementation.

But as to law, indeed the Egyptian police today are in need of retraining of their teams in specific standards, under a culture completely different from that which has prevailed in the past, to overcome the malign practices which have dominated the curricula studied by junior officers in the police academy. Just as they are also in need of an unprecedented effort to break way from "prior convictions" and erase these from their mentality, while striking with an iron hand against those prior convicts in their ranks whose crimes are ongoing. There must be a crystal-clear, no-nonsense challenge to the culture that treats as state property the body of any accused, suspected, or detained, regardless of what type – so that a culture of respect for the law and the Constitution will prevail in detention and interrogation centers.

Ahmad Al-Sawy is an Egyptian journalist. *This item was originally published on t (<http://fikraforum.org/?p=9080#.VwlkxeIrLIU>) he Fikra website (<http://fikraforum.org/?p=9080#.VwlkxeIrLIU>). ❖*

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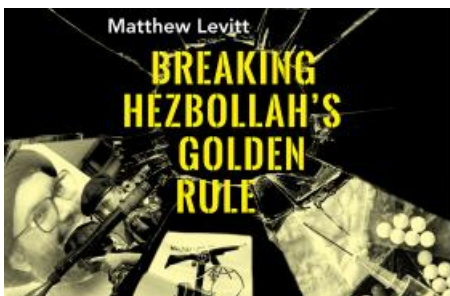
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