

ITALY AND EGYPT:

From Regeni to Libya, the difficult path towards normalization

Daniele Scalea

(Geopolitical analyst, Director-general of IsAG (Rome Institute of Geopolitics) and Ph.D. Candidate in Political studies at the Sapienza University, Rome and he has written three books)

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The last, recent joint note of Italian and Egyptian attorneys on Giulio Regeni's murder shows that a good degree of cooperation in the investigation has been finally reached. Unfortunately that has required various months during which Egyptian transparency wasn't so high. Moreover, as the Italian attorney Pignatone has reminded, that underway is not a joint but a mere Egyptian investigation, to which Italian investigators are only collaborating. So, the chances that we will know one day who and why really killed Regeni are in the hands of destiny and of Egyptian judiciary. For now, it appears fallen at least the trail to the alleged gang of kidnapers killed by the Egyptian police last March.

It is quite obvious that someone among the Egyptian apparatus has tried to sabotage the investigation – too many false trails, omissions and so on. That doesn't mean, however, that Regeni was killed by Egyptian authorities, not to mention a direct involvement of President al-Sisi, which is really unlikely (even if speculations about that appeared on the Italian newspapers “La Repubblica”, citing a mysterious Egyptian source). The admission that police investigated on Regeni isn't an admission of guilt. Egyptian authorities said that the denunciation came from an independent trade union and that the investigation lasted only three days. Could that support the hypothesis of a murder committed by union officials? Whether or not, we are probably still far from any truth, both real and official.

As the judicial sky is clearing up a bit, even on the political stage something has moved between Egypt and Italy after the great chill followed to Regeni's murder last winter. Italy tried to spark off a diplomatic guerrilla against Egypt, persuading her Western allies to isolate the Arab country. Unfortunately for her, that utterly failed. Western countries showed to evaluate al-Sisi's contribution against terrorism and Islamism far more than any moral reservation about democracy and human rights. That should have sound unsurprisingly to the Italian Government, as P.M. Matteo Renzi himself once called al-Sisi “*a great leader*” and F.M. Paolo Gentiloni described him as an “*ally against jihadism*”. No wonder that Italy's Western partners share the same idea on al-Sisi, unchanged for them by any Regeni case.

As professor Anis H. Bajrektarevic rightfully diagnosed the trend of 2010s: “No *Spring* on a single string, right?! How could any social cohesion, indispensable for the MENA democratization, possibly work in the world of simplified choices and various binary categorizations (the *us-vs.-them/either-or*), where primary loyalties are (returned) to sect, tribe or ethnicity? This dilemma relates not only to democracy, but also to the very quest of secularism – for the one presupposes the other – ever since the French Revolution. In this or any other part of the (developing) world,

institutionalization of democracy without secularization of state inevitably leads to a dysfunctional, destabilizing and (self-) debilitating government: divinization of the office and personalization of power...”

Therefore Italy began to soften her stance. In May already, just one month after having recalled it, Italy has reinstated her Ambassador in Cairo. Italian attorneys have begun to issue conciliatory statements about their Egyptian colleagues. Even the July vote of the Italian Parliament, the one that stopped Italian free supply of F-16 spare parts to Egypt, was just a speed bump, result more of an independent move by some parliamentarians than of a studied decision by the Government. In fact persists in the Italian public opinion a trend, lead by Regeni's parents and supported by Amnesty International, pressing for a tougher stance against Egypt, able to condition a large number of MPs but actually in the minority in the country.

So, everything is bound to be settled between Italy and Egypt? Not so fast. Even if Regeni case is no more a decisive factor, may well be a tool in future disputes. And disputes may easily arise from the Libyan theatre. Al-Sisi in Libya strongly supports his alter ego, Khalifa Haftar, the most committed enemy of any Islamist factions. On the contrary Islamists abounds in the other camp, the Tripolitanian one, even after the instate of Fayed al-Sarraj and his GNA. Pressed by Western powers, al-Sarraj installation has been possible only thanks to cooptation of a large part of the former “Libya Dawn” coalition, including Islamists as Abdelhakim Belhadj or Abdelrauf Kara, not to mention the Muslim Brotherhood which is a *bête noire* to al-Sisi.

Recent conquest of the oil ports by Gen. Haftar has aroused official condemnation by Western countries, but it's difficult to predict how much of that public opposition could flow into private connivance. Haftar has already received help by a lot of countries that in the meantime strongly supported the GNA – maybe because splitting up the country is emerging in their assessments as the only viable solution to the Libyan conundrum. The same could be true for Italy, especially if – as it seems – Haftar could be a more reliable guardian of Libyan oil (a large stack of total ENI production) than Ibrahim Jidhran was.