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An Italian researcher is tortured to death in  
Cairo – sombre cause to reconsider the way  
we work with Egypt

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# The Current Column

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## An Italian researcher is tortured to death in Cairo – sombre cause to reconsider the way we work with Egypt

Bonn, 17.03.2016. An Italian citizen and just 28 years of age, Giulio Regeni was finishing his PhD at the University of Cambridge and spent last summer as a visiting researcher at the German Development Institute / Deutsches Institut für Entwicklungspolitik (DIE), where he carried out some outstanding work. He had been a visiting lecturer at the American University in Cairo, Egypt, since September 2015, researching the rise of free trade unions in the wake of the 2011 Tahrir revolution. This is presumably what sealed his fate. Since the New Year, he had commented on the phone to us that he felt a growing sense of unease about his research work and that he had to exercise increasing caution with regard to whom he met and where. Even with his good knowledge of the local language and the situation on the ground, this was a scenario which he had not previously encountered. He then disappeared on 25 January, the fifth anniversary of the Tahrir revolution. His mutilated body was found ten days later, bearing the marks of torture.

Who wanted to get rid of Giulio? While Egyptian Government involvement has not been proven, it would fit the picture. The last few years have seen the passing of a number of repressive laws that make it possible to stifle almost all forms of peaceful criticism of the regime. The Egyptian Commission for Rights and Freedoms reports that 1,700 individuals disappeared in 2015 alone while in the custody of state security forces. And these were by no means only members of the Muslim Brotherhood; they also included civil society activists who had campaigned in 2011 for greater political freedoms. Additionally, the fact that the kidnapping of unwelcome critics always goes unpunished suggests that Egyptian Government agencies are involved or at the very least that they tolerate the activities. For these reasons, the Italian Government and the Italian public are also holding the Egyptian regime responsible.

What Egyptian journalist would write openly about the political, economic and social situation in his or her country in the current climate? What foreign researcher would still have the courage to travel to Egypt to conduct independent research?

Human rights and the freedom of opinion have never been as severely quashed as they are being now under President Sisi, not even by Mubarak shortly before the 2011 Tahrir revolution.

The Egyptian regime also has in its sights researchers and journalists working in Germany, such as Egyptian journalist Ismail Alexandrani. He was arrested at Hurghada International Airport on 29 November last year, having just returned from giving a presentation in Germany, and has been in custody ever since. He had recently campaigned for the rights of the population in the Sinai Peninsula, who are suffering the effects of the military struggle against Islamists there. Another case is that of Atef Botros, Assistant Professor at the University of Marburg. Arrested after landing in Cairo on 29 January, Atef was released following the intervention of the German Embassy. However, he was then removed from the country and banned from re-entering. He set up "Mayadin al-Tahrir", an Egyptian-German non-governmental organisation, in the wake of the 2011 Tahrir revolution. The NGO promotes the interests of marginalised communities in Egypt and showcases contemporary Egyptian art in Germany.

Egypt is a strategic actor in the region, and German and European foreign and development policy has always sought to achieve a balancing act between supporting the regime on the one hand and making careful use of limited scope to promote political reform on the other. This was the case during Mubarak's tenure and it remains so today. However, mass repression and brutality on the part of the security forces requires that this cooperation strategy be reviewed.

The German Government needs to adopt a clearer public stance with regard to the negative domestic policy developments in Egypt, as the Italian Government and European Parliament are currently doing. The latter has used the case of Giulio as an opportunity to pass a resolution that makes clear reference to "the routine practice of enforced disappearances and torture". At the same time, German development policy actors should re-evaluate cooperation with Egypt and focus more systematically on measures that facili-

tate political reform and inclusive development. The German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) has made cooperation with the Middle East and North Africa one of its priority areas in the hope of a democratic awakening. It stresses that its policy is value driven and places human dignity front and centre. Given the trend toward greater repression in Egypt, BMZ should carefully re-examine the delicate relationship between stabilisation and democratic development.

This is often difficult in individual cases, as even well intentioned assistance, for example with the modernisation of irrigation and energy infrastructure, always lends political legitimacy to the government through the involvement of state institutions. Consequently, support activities should focus on strengthening human rights and on promoting democratisation, participation and transparency. They should also be carried out in areas that benefit the population without providing too much stability and political legitimacy to the regime itself.

In light of the atrocities committed against Giulio and many hundreds of others who have disap-

peared, carrying out such careful examination is our ethical duty. It is also a more intelligent strategy pragmatically speaking. The main demands of the Tahrir revolutionaries in 2011 were social justice, political freedom and the opportunity to earn a living. After all the political and societal turmoil of the 2011 to 2013 period, many Egyptians initially waived political freedoms in the hope that President Sisi's authoritarian policy would restore security, at least temporarily, and thereby deliver economic and social progress in the medium term. But if the Egyptians come to recognise that Sisi neither recognises the respect that the state should have for the integrity and personal freedom of its citizens, nor promotes job creation, social justice and economic progress, then their frustration could lead to a fresh wave of political radicalisation. And this could spill over into a Syrian-style uprising. There is a considerable risk that, just as the Syrian Government fuelled the radicalisation of the uprising there, Egypt could also descend into civil war. The region might then be destabilised by many more millions of refugees, who may subsequently head for Europe.