

Egyptian Activists and Human Rights Defenders Stalked and Spied on in Rome, Slandered in Cairo

May 23, 2017

On 20 and 21 May, a work meeting was organized in Rome by EuroMed Rights, an influential Euro-Mediterranean rights network whose members include 70 civil society organizations from Europe and the Middle East and North Africa. They are committed to strengthening the role of civil society and promoting human rights in the framework of the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership and the European Neighborhood policy.

The workshop was dedicated to opportunities for cooperation in the Euro-Mediterranean region, regarding the situation of human rights—be they civil, political, economic, social or cultural—in the region, and therefore also in Egypt.

Participants included academics, researchers and representatives of civil society organizations working on human rights in Italy, Denmark, Tunisia, Palestine, Germany and Belgium, including some eminent figures such as Kamel Jendoubi, Honorary President of EuroMed Rights; Bahey el-Din Hassan, Director of the Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies; Marc Schade-Poulsen, Executive Director of EuroMed Rights; human rights lawyer Khaled Ali; the political scientist Dr Amr Hamzawy; human rights lawyer Mohamed Zarea, who is president of the Arab Penal Reform Organization; Ahmed Samih, Executive Director of Andalus Institute for Tolerance and Anti-Violence Studies; Dr Nancy Okail, Executive Director of the Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy; and Dr Moataz el Fegiery, MENA Protection Coordinator at Front Line Defenders.

The meeting was part of Euromed Rights' program of internal work, and had not therefore been publicized beyond the participants themselves.

On arrival at Fiumicino International Airport, one participant encountered a person waiting for him, who introduced himself as an Egyptian journalist; the man insisted heavily on escorting him to his hotel. Faced with a polite refusal, the self-proclaimed journalist then managed to speak with the participant's taxi driver, and likely managed thus to obtain the address of the hotel to which the person was headed.

The self-styled journalist, along with a photographer and another individual, later reached the hotel where the meeting was in progress, and duped the reception staff into showing them the list of participants. They stayed in the lobby and adjacent bar for hours, following meeting participants when they moved in or out of the hotel, thus managing to take photographs of them. They also managed to slip into the meeting room.

On May 22, libelous articles appeared in several Egyptian newspapers, illustrated by these photos taken in Rome. Among other things, they accuse Egyptian participants of taking part in a meeting intended to "foment a state of chaos and instability in Egypt in the coming period, ahead of the presidential elections."

These are very grave lies, which could cost a person their freedom in Egypt, if not worse. Amnesty International Italy, AOI, Arci, Article 21, Rete della Pace, and Un Ponte Per... are deeply concerned about Egyptian activists and Human Rights defenders, and express their sympathy and solidarity with them, as attacks against them continue. Security agents and pro-government journalists have directed grave insults and threats at Dr Nancy Okail (an academic and Director of the Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy) on Facebook, after she denounced what took place in Rome. On the morning of May 23, one of the participants is summoned for interrogation by a judge in Cairo.

The Italian Government and all competent institutions must intervene with the Egyptian authorities to ask them to account for these events on Italian territory, and demand that such incidents do not reoccur. Italy must be a safe country for Egyptian activists and human rights defenders.