

Italian government implicated in cover-up of US “rendition”

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The Muslim cleric Hassan Mustafa Osama Nasr, better known as Abu Omar, was kidnapped in Milan in February 2003 in broad daylight and rendered by the CIA to Egypt, where he was tortured and where he remains imprisoned.

The right-wing government at the time, headed by Silvio Berlusconi, always claimed that Italy had not supported the abduction of Abu Omar and had possessed no advance knowledge of it. At the same time, his administration used all means possible to prevent an investigation of the kidnapping and the pursuit of those responsible—even though at the time of his kidnapping Abu Omar had been granted political asylum in Italy and his abduction by a foreign secret service represented a serious breach of the law.

Now the cover-up is unraveling. In the three-and-a-half years since Abu Omar was kidnapped, details have surfaced about the abduction and those responsible. The identity of his CIA kidnappers is now certain, and there is no doubt that the Italian military secret service, SISMI (Servizio per le Informazioni e la Sicurezza Militare), and in all probability the government, were not only informed about the abduction but actively participated in it.

The Milan public prosecutor responsible for investigating the case has filed charges of kidnapping or aiding kidnapping against 26 American and 13 Italian citizens. With one exception, the Americans accused belong to the CIA. The Italians include three high-ranking SISMI officers.

Although Italian complicity is now a matter of record, Italy’s current center-left government headed by Romano Prodi is upholding its predecessor’s policy of secrecy. Undersecretary Enrico Micheli, responsible for the coordination of the secret services, told a parliamentary commission that since the September 11 attacks, any cooperation between the Italian and American secret services on matters of terrorism is subject to strict secrecy.

The chairman of the parliamentary commission on the secret services, Claudio Scajola, said that Undersecretary Micheli had “responded to our direct questions about whether the American authorities had informed the Italian government before, after or during the abduction of Abu Omar by saying this matter was a state secret.” Micheli stressed that the Prodi government would uphold this policy, even before the Milan court if necessary.

This secrecy is all the more significant since the activities of the Italian secret services were not limited to Abu Omar’s kidnapping. According to media reports, they also bribed journalists to keep quiet about the operation and sought to discredit politicians and judges involved in the investigation.

The editor-in-chief of the right-wing daily *Libero*, Renato Farina, admitted he had received payments in exchange for cooperating with SISMI and had published falsified documents in order to discredit Prodi, who successfully challenged Berlusconi in the last general election. Two journalists from the newspaper *Repubblica* who had been investigating Abu Omar's kidnapping were placed under surveillance by SISMI.

There are indications that the collaboration of SISMI and the CIA in the Abu Omar case was only one part of a larger conspiracy directed against politicians, judges and other public figures.

There are links to a recently exposed illegal wiretapping operation conducted by the head of security at Telecom Italia, Giuliano Tavaroli. In cooperation with tax investigators, policemen, bank employees, legal officials and private agents, Tavaroli conducted a profitable business involving the sale of wiretap data. SISMI Deputy Chief Marco Mancini, who was arrested last summer in connection with Abu Omar's kidnapping, is a close friend of Tavaroli, met him regularly, and had thousands of telephone conversations with him.

Shortly after this illegal wiretap operation was exposed, an additional spying affair was uncovered. For many years the tax returns of prominent politicians, particularly those involved in the current center-left government, were examined in a systematic and illegal fashion.

Both scandals entail the surveillance of a considerable number of opponents of former Prime Minister Berlusconi, including Prodi, former Italian Communist Party (PCI) member and current state president Giorgio Napolitano, his predecessor, Carlo Azeglio Ciampi, industrialists such as the Benetton brothers and Carlo De Benedetti, and many more.

Although numerous members of the present administration, including the prime minister, were victims of these conspiracies, the government has drawn a veil over the secret services that it is not prepared to lift either for parliamentary or judicial investigation.

Italy and NATO

The reason for such secrecy is that the Prodi government does not want to endanger the traditionally close military and secret service links between Italy and the US.

Italy is member of NATO and the American and Italian security forces cooperated closely throughout the Cold War. Their priority was to prevent the PCI, which maintained relations with the Soviet Union and was on occasion the largest party in parliament, from entering government.

The NATO secret organization Gladio, which specialized in sabotage and acts of terrorism, was particularly active in Italy. In the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s a network including the CIA, SISMI, neo-fascists and the mafia committed numerous terrorist acts which destabilized the country and undermined the influence of the PCI.

Also implicated were the Vatican and the secret Masons P2 lodge, within whose circles Berlusconi began his ascent toward becoming the richest man in Italy. The most spectacular bomb attack by these right-wing forces came in 1980 at the main railway station in Bologna, where 85 people died and some 200 were injured.

These conspiracies are well-documented. Courageous journalists and some state attorneys have uncovered countless details that have been presented in films and theatre pieces. But only a few people have ever been held to account.

Now the old structures have been revived within the framework of the “war against terrorism,” while Prodi and his coalition allies in the organisations that emerged from the PCI do nothing about it.

The new Italian government has withdrawn Italian troops from Iraq, as it had promised in the elections. But the last soldier had barely returned to Italy when the government sent a far larger contingent to Lebanon, where its mission is to block Hezbollah’s weapons supplies.

Italy also continues to supply troops to Afghanistan. Rome therefore stands at the military forefront in the Middle East and Central Asia. Italy has greater freedom of action in these regions than it had in Iraq, but the Italian secret services and military continue to cooperate closely with their US partners.

The Prodi government wants to avoid an open conflict with the CIA and the Bush administration, even if the right-wing conspiracy threatens its own political future, or even—as was the case with Aldo Moro in the 1970s—the lives of cabinet members. At that time there were many indications that Gladio was involved in the abduction and murder of the Christian Democratic politician by the Red Brigades.

The kidnapping of Abu Omar

It did not prove difficult for the Milan public prosecutor to uncover who was involved in Abu Omar’s kidnapping. The CIA agents involved had felt so safe that they acted recklessly and made no special effort to cover their tracks.

The kidnapping took place in broad daylight on a public street. Three men pulled the Muslim cleric, who was walking from his Milan apartment to the mosque, into a mini-bus and drove away. An eye-witness was later able to describe the events in detail to the police.

Abu Omar was taken to Aviano Air Force Base and then flown to Cairo via Germany, ending up in an Egyptian prison where he was tortured.

Only in April 2004, when the Egyptian authorities temporarily released him, was he able to make contact with friends and relatives. He described to them the details of his abduction and mistreatment; reporting that he had been beaten, given electrical shocks and other forms of torture. He had lost hearing in one ear. Three weeks later he was rearrested and has since remained in prison, without ever having been put on trial.

The Milan public prosecutor, at the behest of Omar’s family and the Muslim community in Milan, has been able to reconstruct quite precisely the course of events surrounding the abduction, since the CIA operatives used mobile phones and credit cards, hired cars, left their names on hotel registries, and spent a great deal of money. Surveillance photos were even found in the apartment of a CIA agent in Milan.

In July 2005, the Milan public prosecutor filed arrest warrants against the thirteen Americans involved, who had already left Italy. In December, the arrest warrants were expanded, bringing to 22 the number of Americans charged.

Role of SISMI

Further information came from Brussels, where a committee of the European Union parliament was investigating the CIA practice of “extraordinary renditions.” The former CIA agent Michael Scheuer gave evidence to the committee and in several newspaper interviews accused the Italian government of complicity. From 1996 to 1999, Scheuer had led the CIA’s “bin Laden” unit and had left the service only in November 2004.

“The Italians allowed us to kidnap the Imam in Milan,” Scheuer told the Italian newspaper *Repubblica*.

Scheuer is well acquainted with Jeffrey W. Castelli, who was the CIA boss in Rome until the summer of 2003. Scheuer said the American secret service had never carried out an abduction without the agreement of the country concerned, particularly if it concerned an ally such as Italy. He said Italian agreement to the abduction was given by Marco Mancini, responsible for counter-espionage operations in SISMI.

In July 2006, Mancini and his superior at the time of the abduction, General Gustavo Pignero, were arrested. Telephone calls between the two, which *Corriere della Sera* published on July 7 2006, show that they were involved in the abduction and its preparation. Several other secret service operatives have since confessed to having been involved in the kidnapping.

Shortly before the abduction, Pignero and Mancini had removed local SISMI chiefs in Milan, Padua and Trieste from their posts because they had expressed doubts about the legality of the undertaking. One of them gave evidence to the effect that he had expressed opposition to the CIA-SISMI operation because the planned action was obviously “illegal” and was “against the principles of our democracy.” He said he was relieved of his post so that he would not endanger the operation.

In prison, Mancini began to sing. He reported the existence of a top-secret organization, the so-called Counter-Terrorist Intelligence Center (CTIC), which operates in parallel with the secret service. The organization, to which selected SISMI agents belonged, acts under the direction of the CIA to arrest “terrorist suspects,” he said.

The *Wall Street Journal* and *Washington Post*, citing high-ranking CIA agents, have reported on similar organizations that cooperate with the CIA in other countries. There are thought to be dozens of such groups in US-friendly states in Europe, Asia and the Middle East.

The Milan public prosecutor’s office has also filed charges against SISMI boss Nicolo Pollari, who had always protested the innocence of his service in the Abu Omar kidnapping case, even giving false testimony to the European parliament.

Pollari is considered to be a close friend of ex-Prime Minister Berlusconi, and was instrumental in his campaigns against the Milan judiciary and state attorneys, and against Prodi. Despite this, the Prodi government kept him at his post. His dismissal was only considered at a later time, in the context of a comprehensive reorganization of the secret services.

Meanwhile, neither the Italian government nor the European Union has called on Egypt to release Abu Omar.

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