

BRISMES letters on the death of Giulio Regeni and government response

Read the text of BRISMES' message to President Al-Sisi regarding the death of Giulio Regeni (6 February 2016) and follow up message to Alistair Burt, cc HE Mr Geoffrey Adams, British Ambassador to Cairo and the response received from Alistair Burt.

The Rt Hon Alistair Burt MP, Minister of State for the Middle East
Foreign & Commonwealth Office
King Charles Street
London
SW1A 2AH

19 November 2018

Dear Alistair

GIULIO REGENI

I am writing on behalf of the British Society for Middle Eastern Studies (BRISMES), the leading UK association in the field of Middle Eastern studies, which was founded in 1973 to encourage and promote the study of the Middle East in the United Kingdom and Ireland. The Society publishes the *British Journal of Middle East Studies* and has several hundred academic, student and professional members worldwide.

As you will already know, in February 2016 Giulio Regeni, a PhD student at the University of Cambridge, was found dead in Egypt, where he had been conducting research for his degree. Despite much speculation, the precise circumstances of his death have not yet been established, and many questions remain unanswered regarding his abduction, torture and murder. In addition to the profound anguish this has caused for Giulio's family, the case has obvious implications for academic relations between the UK and Egypt, for researchers working in the Middle East, and indeed for academic freedom more generally.

In Italy, the Regeni affair continues to command widespread attention among the public. In May 2018, SeSaMO (the Italian counterpart of BRISMES) arranged a two-day seminar in Sicily — in which BRISMES participated — to discuss the implications of the affair, and it is intended to publish papers from the seminar in a book aimed at the Italian public. In August 2018 Luigi Di Maio, Italy's Labour and Industry Minister, visited Cairo and noted that 'the normalisation of [Italy's] relations with Egypt can only follow the truth on the death of Giulio Regeni. I hope that a breakthrough can be reached by the end of the year.' The following month, September 2018, the Italian Lower House Speaker Roberto Fico held talks in Cairo with Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi about Regeni's murder, noting that 'There was only one item on the agenda of my meeting with the president and that was the question of Giulio Regeni.'

By contrast, although British academics have continued to keep the issue alive, most recently in a letter to the *Guardian* dated 22 August 2018, it appears to have simply fallen off the radar as far as the UK government is concerned. Instead, the government, in collaboration with Universities UK, appears to be pursuing a policy of fostering a strengthening of UK/ Egyptian academic ties, which take no account of Giulio Regeni's murder or of the failure of the joint Egyptian–Italian investigation to make any substantive progress. This apparent reluctance of the UK government to push for a timely and credible explanation of what happened to Regeni is creating the impression in many quarters that, in contrast to our Italian colleagues, the UK has simply written off the case. We realise that, since Regeni was an Italian citizen, it is for the Italian Government to take the lead on his case. Nevertheless, his having been a student at a British university gives the UK Government a *locus standi* on the issue, and there are wider implications for academic freedom and the interest British scholars have in conducting research in Egypt.

There are, of course, many reasons to be concerned about academic freedom in Egypt that have no connexion with Giulio Regeni or his fate. For UK academics working in the field, however — particularly, those in Cambridge who have been involved with Regeni's research themselves— the Regeni affair remains arguably the most pressing of these issues. Few British scholars currently regard Egypt as a safe place in which to conduct research. British students of Arabic language increasingly turn to other destinations for their in-area language study. A speedy, credible and lawful resolution of the Regeni affair is now urgent and important.. We urge the UK authorities to re-engage with this issue as a matter of urgency and to add their weight to the calls being made by others for a swift and credible resolution of the investigation and for the punishment of those responsible.

Warm regards,

Stuart

Stuart Laing, President, BRISMES

cc Geoffrey Adams, British Ambassador to Cairo

[Response from Alistair Burt](#)

Below is the text of BRISMES' letter of February 2016 to President al-Sisi:

His Excellency Abdel Fattah al-Sisi
President, Arab Republic of Egypt
'Abdin Palace
Cairo, Egypt

6th February 2016

Your Excellency

I am writing on behalf of the British Society for Middle Eastern Studies (BRISMES) to express our deep concern at the news of the unexplained death of Giulio Regeni, an Italian student and BRISMES member studying for a PhD at the University of Cambridge (UK), who disappeared in Cairo on 25 January and whose body was found on a road outside Cairo on 3 February.

The British Society for Middle Eastern Studies (BRISMES) was founded in 1973 to bring together teachers, researchers, students, diplomats, journalists and others who deal professionally with the Middle East. Membership is open to all, regardless of nationality, and we maintain strong and expanding links with both institutions and individual scholars in the Middle East, including many in Egypt itself. We greatly value these links, which we regard as making a valuable contribution to the understanding of the region generally, as well as to relations between scholars within the region and those outside it.

Giulio Regeni, a PhD student at the Department of Politics and International Studies (Polis) at the University of Cambridge, UK, was a visiting scholar at the American University in Cairo (AUC). According to reports in the newspapers and other media, he left his apartment at 8 pm on 25 January with the intention of taking the metro from Duqqi to Bab al-Louq to meet a friend, but never arrived. We understand that, although initial statements from your government attributed Giulio Regeni's death to a robbery gone awry or a traffic accident, State Prosecutor Ahmed Nagi has now admitted that there were signs of torture on the body, including cigarette burns and knife wounds.

Although we accept that the precise circumstances of Giulio Regeni's death have not yet been established, the incident has reinforced a growing impression among BRISMES members and others that the Egyptian authorities are currently failing to accord the necessary respect for the principles of academic freedom and legitimate academic activity that are demanded both by Egyptian law and by the various international treaties to which your government is a signatory.

We accordingly seek from the Egyptian government an assurance that the circumstances of Giulio Regeni's death will as a matter of urgency be investigated in a full and impartial manner and that those responsible will be arrested and prosecuted in accordance with the provisions of Egyptian law.

We await your response,

Yours sincerely,

Frances Guy,
BRISMES President