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Egypt: Smear campaign and incitement against human rights defenders in Egypt

On 25 May 2017, Egyptian parliamentarian and TV presenter, Mostafa Bakry, broadcast the names and photos of a group of Egyptian human rights defenders who attended a human rights meeting in Rome on 20-21 May 2017 on his TV program on the private Egyptian channel, *Sada El-Balad*, declaring them traitors and urging Egyptian intelligence services to abduct and return them to Egypt in coffins for criminal trial.

On 20-21 May 2017, **Euro Med Rights** organised a [meeting](#) in Rome on human rights in Egypt which brought together academics, researchers and representatives of civil society organisations working on human rights from Italy, Denmark, Tunisia, Palestine, Germany, Belgium and Germany. Among the participants were **Bahey Eldin Hassan** director of the **Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies**; human rights lawyer **Khaled Ali**; political scientist and columnist **Amr Hamzawy**; **Mohamed Zarea**, president of the Arab Organisation for Penal Reform; **Ahmed Samih**, executive director of the **Andalus Institute for Tolerance and Anti-Violence Studies**; **Nancy Okail**, executive director of the Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy; and **Moataz El Fegiery**, **Front Line Defenders** MENA Protection Coordinator.

Egyptian human rights defenders who participated in the meeting were subjected to surveillance and harassment. Two persons claiming to be Egyptian journalists were waiting for one of the participants at his arrival gate at Fiumicino airport in Rome and asked the taxi driver for the address of his hotel. Two persons showed up at the hotel the next day and attempted to enter the room where the workshop was taking place. They stayed in the hotel lobby, trying to intimidate participants by taking photos of them and following them in the street. In parallel, a smear campaign was launched in Egyptian pro-government media outlets including [El-Youm El-Sabaa](#) and [DotMsr](#) on 21 and 22 May 2017, accusing participants of plotting an attack against Egypt, and using the photos taken in the hotel lobby. One participant was threatened in aggressive and sexist terms on Facebook by a person claiming to be an Egyptian journalist based in Italy.

On 21 May 2017, parliamentarian and TV presenter Mostafa Bakry [tweeted](#) that he urged the authorities to prosecute the participants who ‘collaborate with foreign enemies and international intelligence agencies to harm Egypt’s national security’. On 25 May 2017, in his [TV program](#) on *Sada El-Balad* tv channel, Bakry described Egyptian human rights defenders as spies and traitors. He urged Egyptian security services to abduct them and bring them back to Egypt in coffins for trial, saying that ‘this won’t be the first time that Egyptian intelligence does something similar abroad’. Due to the increasing repression in Egypt and the ongoing crackdown on civil society, most of those human rights defenders mentioned by Bakry currently reside outside Egypt. In his program, Mostafa Bakry interviewed an Egyptian journalist in Rome who repeated the false allegations about the meeting, claiming that Egyptian human rights defenders and **Euro Med Rights** held a secret meeting in Rome to conspire against Egypt and to arrange for a coup against President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi.

The harassment of Egyptian human rights defenders in Rome was [covered](#) by the Italian newspaper *La Repubblica* and was [condemned](#) by 18 Italian NGOs including Amnesty International Italy and ARCI. Since 2014, some Egyptian human rights defenders including, Bahey Eldin Hassan and Moataz El

Fegiery, [received](#) death threats inside Egypt. However, this is the first time the threat and incitement against Egyptian human rights defenders is made publicly and by an influential politician known for his close ties to President el-Sisi and security services. Judicial harassment of Egyptian human rights defenders intensified since 2015. Leaders and members of 37 Egyptian human rights organisations have been accused of “receipt of illegal foreign funding” and “working without legal permission.” Furthermore, several human rights defenders have been subjected to travel bans or freezes of their personal and/or their organisations’ assets.

Front Line Defenders expresses concern for the threats made against Egyptian human rights defenders who attended the human rights meeting in Rome and the acts of harassment and intimidation against them, which it believes to be directly motivated by their peaceful and legitimate human rights activities.

Front Line Defenders urges the authorities in Egypt to:

1. Carry out an immediate, thorough and impartial investigation into the threats against Egyptian human rights defenders and the acts of surveillance and harassment against them;
2. Publicly condemn the incitement made by parliamentarian Mostafa Bakry and take all necessary measures to ensure the physical and psychological security of human rights defenders;
3. Guarantee in all circumstances that all human rights defenders in Egypt are able to carry out their legitimate human rights activities without fear of reprisals and free of all restrictions.

Front Line Defenders urges the authorities in Italy to:

1. Carry out an immediate, thorough and impartial investigation into the threats against Egyptian human rights defenders and the acts of surveillance and harassment against them.