

U.S. Killing of Intelligence Official Shakes Italian-U.S. Relationship

by Claudio Celani

The killing of an Italian intelligence official in Baghdad by U.S. military forces on March 4 is shaking relations between Italy and the United States in a way potentially more serious than the 1985 *Achille Lauro* crisis, or the 1998 Cermis tragedy, when a U.S. military aircraft caused the crash of a funicular, killing 20 civilians in northern Italy. The incident is revealing how U.S. military forces have lost control of the situation on the ground in Iraq, as U.S. troops are shooting at officials of allied military forces—in the best case, accidentally—as a result of an occupation policy which includes radical rules of engagement. It also includes Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld's "reforms," resulting in a de facto destruction of intelligence and communications capabilities among the various U.S. agencies.

Nicola Calipari, department head of foreign intelligence of SISMI, the Italian Military Intelligence Service, was killed when a U.S. military patrol shot at the car in which Calipari, with another SISMI official, was escorting a liberated Italian hostage to the Baghdad airport. According to Italian reports, Calipari had communicated and coordinated his moves with U.S. security forces, and his car stopped immediately when it met a U.S. patrol. Nevertheless, "the car was covered with a rainstorm of bullets"—in the words of survivors—fired by U.S. automatic weapons. While trying to protect liberated hostage Giuliana Sgrena, Calipari was hit in the head by a bullet, and died instantly. Sgrena and the other SISMI official, who was driving the car, were wounded.

Calipari had led the negotiations that resulted in the liberation of Sgrena, a left-wing journalist who had been held one month in captivity by unknown Iraqi factions, and he picked up Sgrena that same day in Baghdad. This was the third successful operation conducted by Calipari, who had previously liberated six hostages out of a total of eight Italian citizens kidnapped in Iraq. Underscoring the drama of Calipari's murder, at the moment the car was under fire, the SISMI officials were on the telephone with the Italian Prime Minister's office, reporting their successful liberation operation. Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi, reported to the Italian Senate, that he had followed part of the tragedy live, over the phone in the office of State Secretary to the Prime Minister, Gianni Letta.

The Italian government has reacted with expected firmness. Prime Minister Berlusconi summoned U.S. Ambassador Mel Sembler to his office the evening of March 4. He then received a late night phone call from "his good friend George"

Bush at 1 AM, followed by routine phone calls by U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and Rumsfeld to Italian Foreign Minister Gianfranco Fini and Defense Minister Antonio Martino, respectively. Bush followed up with a letter sent to Italian State President Carlo Azeglio Ciampi, on March 9, in which he promised that there will be "a rapid and exhaustive joint investigation by Italy and the United States to shed light on this terrible tragedy." Understanding the seriousness of the matter, the United States government has established an investigative committee, which will include an Italian military official and a diplomat, a truly unprecedented move.

A Larger Issue: The Rumsfeld 'Reforms'

However, the incident of Calipari's death goes far beyond the issue of Italian-American relationships. The larger causes for the incident lie in the conflict between Secretary Rumsfeld's neo-con faction, and more traditionally oriented circles in the intelligence and military establishment. Rumsfeld has increasingly shifted intelligence and special operations capabilities away from its institutional place, that is, the CIA, transferring them to covert action structures in the Pentagon.

Unconfirmed reports speak of "death squad" capabilities being implemented, similar to those that operated in the past in Central and South America, to hit guerrilla members and suspected supporters among the Iraqi civilian population. Such "reforms" have increased an already chaotic situation, adding a lack of communication and coordination in which overstressed U.S. troops shoot at anything which they see moving. A correction of this policy, including current rules of engagement, is indispensable for the continuation of an allied presence in Iraq.

Also, Italians will not accept anything short of the identification and just punishment of those responsible, different from what occurred, for instance, in the 1998 Cermis case. Nicola Calipari has become a hero for the Italian people, who participated in the tens of thousands at his funeral ceremony in Rome, and has united political forces and institutions in the refusal to accept his death as a "fruit of destiny." Although it is too early to speak about the consequences for the Italian engagement in Iraq, Prime Minister Berlusconi might lose his job next year, when general elections take place, if his government is humiliated by its American ally in the eyes of the Italian people.

Italy has 3,000 soldiers in Iraq, in the southwestern area around Nasariyah. Although the Italians were deployed after the official end of the war, and have an official peace-keeping mandate, they are de facto the second largest ally of the United States in Iraq, with Britain being the first. The Italians, however, as distinct from the Anglo-American forces, have built their security almost entirely on a network of relationships with the Iraqi population and their local leaders. This is because of the nature of the peace-keeping mandate, which includes restricted rules of engagement. An example of this is that the Italians originally deployed without tanks and without attack helicopters, a decision which was recently reversed after a couple of guerrilla attacks caused casualties among the Italian troops.

Central to the Italian operation is, of course, the intelligence structure. SISMI, the military intelligence service, has built up a network of contacts among the Iraqi population, what specialists call "Human Intelligence" (Humint), which proved to be invaluable, not only in anticipating threats to Italian forces, but also in acquiring information leading to the liberation of hostages. In some cases, SISMI was key in helping allied intelligence services in similar situations. French military intelligence has publicly acknowledged SISMI's help in the liberation of a French hostage. Nicola Calipari was the man pulling the strings of the SISMI network in Iraq. Therefore his death, beyond the tragedy of a human loss, has shaken the whole Italian operation in Iraq.

Calipari's death comes almost exactly one year after SISMI produced a report for the Italian government, which criticized major aspects of the American occupation policy, including the decision to dissolve the Iraqi army and administrative structures. This decision, along with the lack of reconstruction of vital infrastructure, had fed popular hostility against American occupation troops, and increased terrorist risks.

Italians have made it clear that they will tolerate no cover-up of the real circumstances of the Calipari shooting. The Rome state attorney has opened an investigation for "voluntary murder," and has already interrogated Sgrena and the other survivor, a SISMI officer who was also wounded. U.S. authorities, who have promised collaboration, have turned the car over to the Italians, which is a major piece of evidence in establishing the nature and the extent of the shooting.

Divergent Views of the Incident

However, fundamental aspects of the official U.S. and Italian versions of the incident diverge, as Foreign Minister Gianfranco Fini stated in his address to Parliament on March 8. Whereas U.S. military authorities in Baghdad publicly stated that Calipari's car did not stop for the U.S. patrol, and that it was proceeding at "high speed," Italian official reports state the contrary. Furthermore, U.S. military authorities deny that the Italians had communicated Calipari's travel plans to relevant U.S. security forces. Despite the fact that the Italians officially rejected the U.S. allegations, the *Wall Street Journal*

and other U.S. neo-con newspapers insisted on the U.S. version of the event on March 10, even after Fini had read his detailed report to the Parliament.

In his report, Fini explained how Italian intelligence had worked both to discover who had kidnapped Sgrena, and to establish contact with them: "SISMI, implementing directions from the government, worked on the Iraqi territory using those arrangements that have long been deployed—and still are deployed—in the area and, it is worth recalling, had already been employed in other circumstances, allowing for the release of other hostages.

"Furthermore, synergistic forms of collaboration have been guaranteed with the coalition forces, with the hostage-center of the U.S. embassy in Baghdad, and with all intelligence services operating in the area. . . . A possible military option to liberate Giuliana Sgrena had never been considered as feasible by our government," Fini stated, as it "would not be 100 percent effective." "We began a whole series of initiatives which, on the one hand allowed [us] to prove the futility of some connections and channels, while on the other, finally led to the possibility of identifying what then proved to be the right channel to obtain the liberation of Giuliana Sgrena."

Fini energetically denied rumors that the Italians had paid a ransom to liberate the hostage. When the moment came, he said, "On March 4, about 4:30 PM local time, Dr. Nicola Calipari, together with another colleague, a great expert in the area because of his former and distinguished long-term operational experience in the area, arrived at the Baghdad airport. About 40 minutes went by, during which Dr. Calipari made all necessary contacts—I repeat—all necessary contacts with American military authorities in charge of airport security, not only to notify the authorities of his and his colleague's presence, but also to obtain, as they did, a pass to move freely around the airport and surrounding areas."

Once they reached the place agreed upon for the hostage release, Sgrena was found in the wreckage of a car and taken into the Toyota with Calipari and the other SISMI officer, Fini continued: "The driver of the car was the other SISMI agent . . . there was no third intelligence officer, except at the Baghdad airport. . . . During the drive [to the airport], the car's inside lights were kept on: this, both to facilitate possible controls at checkpoints (which, however, were not encountered), and to allow Dr. Calipari to make some phone calls. These are the phone calls with which he communicated to Dr. Gianni Letta [State Secretary to the Prime Minister] and [SISMI head] Gen. [Niccolò] Pollari the successful liberation of Sgrena, and the phone calls aimed at announcing to the U.S. military authorities their imminent return to the airport area, in order to obtain all possible help for an easy and direct entrance.

"The car drove through the motorway at a speed of about 70 km per hour, which was compatible with the rain-covered ground." The car slowed down in a flooded underpass, then took a turn left, slowing down even more. "At that moment . . . the car was driving at a speed which could not have been

above 40 km per hour. In the middle of the curve, a very strong light was turned on, similar to a spotlight, in a higher position with respect to the car, and at a distance of about 10 meters, probably on the right side of the road. After the car slowed down and stopped almost immediately, there was a shooting action, probably from several automatic weapons, lasting 10-15 seconds; the shots hit the car on its right side and the driver saw tracer shots—which were thus visible—pass in front of his chest and over his legs.

“Immediately afterwards, he was ordered by some U.S. soldiers, surrounding the car, to get out. Our officer was made to kneel at about 10 meters from the car and, although he spoke English, he had difficulty presenting himself and his colleague as belonging to the Italian embassy, adding that the woman in the car was the kidnapped journalist. In particular, during this hasty and tragic phase, two young American soldiers approached our official and, in a dejected manner, repeatedly apologized for what had happened. . . . [A]fter a not short lapse of time, Giuliana Sgrena was put in an American military vehicle and driven towards the hospital. . . .

‘Clarity Must Be Reached’

“The [Italian] Government has the duty to stress that the reconstruction of the tragic event . . . does not coincide fully with what has been so far communicated by the U.S. authorities,” Fini said. He added that the Italian government holds the “hypothesis of an ambush,” which has been put forward by Sgrena, as “absolutely groundless.” “But this does not prevent, and rather makes it necessary to demand, that clarity be reached,” he said, “that light be shed on still obscure aspects, to identify the responsibility for what happened and, if such responsibility is identified, to demand and obtain punishment of those guilty.”

Prime Minister Berlusconi repeated Fini’s reconstruction of the event the next day, speaking in front of the Senate, and added a few details on Calipari’s communications with U.S. security officials. “On their way [to the Baghdad airport], Berlusconi said, “Dr. Calipari called up State Secretary Dr. Gianni Letta and SISMI director, Gen. Niccolò Pollari, communicating the successful liberation. Dr. Calipari, then, informed, through our liaison officer (the one who we initially thought was a fourth passenger in the car, who instead had stayed close to an American colonel in the airport), American military authorities about the immediate arrival in the airport area.”

Berlusconi also stressed that the Italian reconstruction of the event is different from the American one: “This reconstruction results from what has been witnessed by our intelligence official, who was together with Dr. Calipari and was wounded in his arm, but does not coincide fully with what has been so far communicated by U.S. authorities.” He added, “only a frank and mutual acknowledgment of those responsible will bring to a close an incident of which we feel the full unreasonableness, and we bear all the suffering.”