

Middle East Solidarity

Issue 1 • Spring 2015 • £3

The Gulf's tyrants and their British backers



News

Bahrain base plans attacked

Britain rewards repression,
say activists

Tunisian teachers strike

Demands for education reform

Anti-terror laws target Egypt's opposition

Sherif Azer analyses
the clampdown

Features

Challenging sexual harassment in Egypt

Activists' battle to make
Tahrir a safe space

Sectarianism and counter- revolution

Learning the lessons
from oppression

Interview

Moroccan activist speaks out

'Your solidarity matters'



For Sale!!

وطن للبيع!!

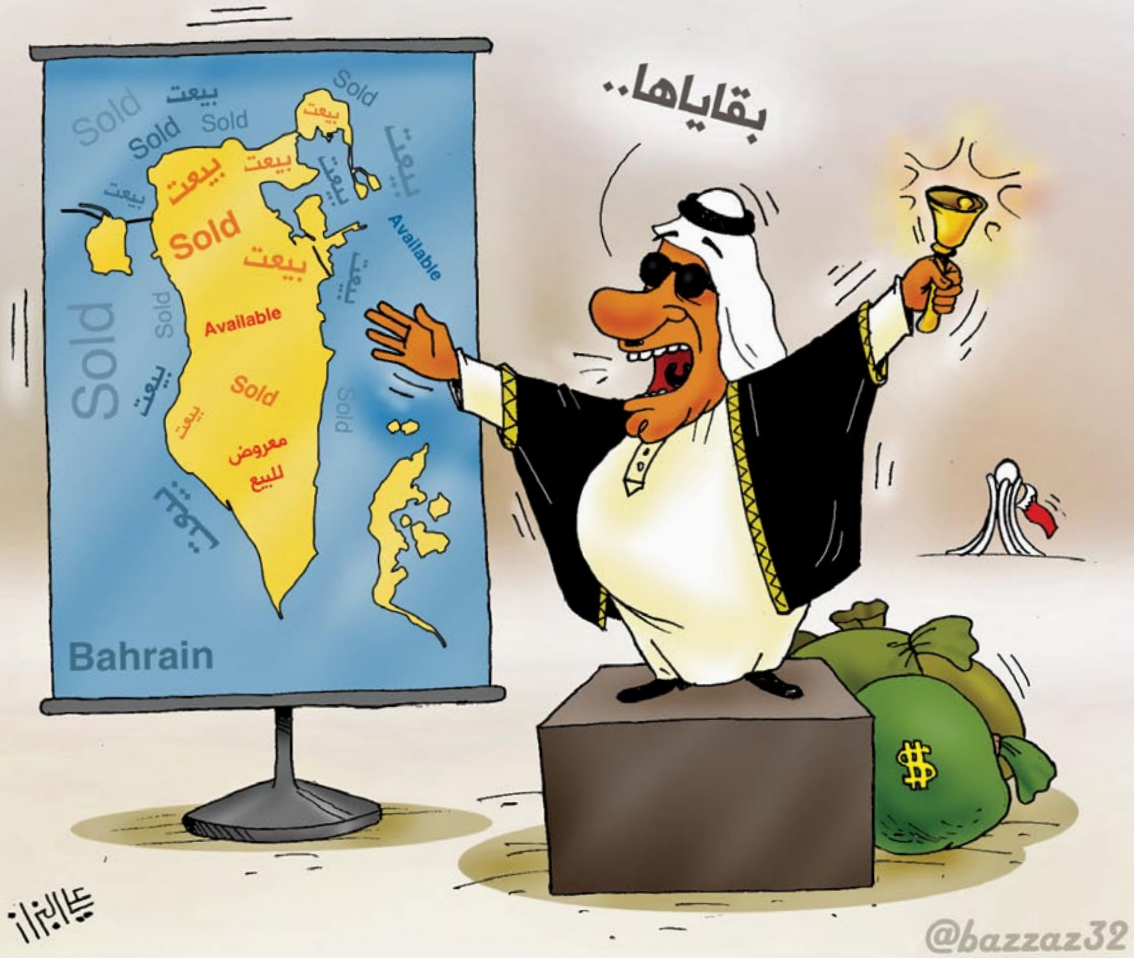


Illustration: Ashraf Omar



Contents

Cover story

19 The Gulf's tyrants and their British backers

John Horne and Anne Alexander analyse the role of the UK in helping the Gulf monarchies crush dissent

Features

11 Challenging sexual violence in Tahrir

Nadine Marroushi tells the story of how Egyptian activists fought back collectively against sexual assault by the state

15 Sectarianism and the Counter-Revolution

Sameh Naguib and Joseph Daher explore how the retreat of revolution sparked sectarian tensions

Letter

4 Hanaa Soltan writes to her jailed brother Mohamed

News reports

5 British base planned for Bahrain; Activists jailed

6 Popular resistance in Syria; Egyptian cement workers walk out

7 Unfair trials and anti-terror laws extend clampdown in Egypt

8 Kuwait's Bedoon movement, Moroccan civil servants strike

14 Tunisian teachers strike for education reform

Interview

9 Repression and resistance in Morocco

Trade union activist Mohamed Boutayeb talks to Andy Reid of the PCS union

Campaign reports

18 BDS victories at SOAS and Sussex; Protest against Yemen bombing

22 Arab revolutions conference; Egyptian activists' assets confiscated; Hunger strike solidarity

23 London Sphinx gagged; Journalists resist censors

24 Bahrain tear gas shipment halted; Investigation exposes land sales

Future events & campaigns

25 Road Block art installation; Postcard campaign; Qatar abuses exposed

Campaign guide

26 Prisoners need your support

Guest columnist

28 Yemen: an ugly war for the Gulf's money

Dina Omar exposes Egypt's complicity in Saudi Arabia's "ugly war" on Yemen

Editorial

Events in the Middle East often dominate the news, but it is the stories of war, sectarian violence and western military intervention which grab the headlines.

Middle East Solidarity shows a different side to the region.

We report on resistance to repression and imperialism from Morocco to Yemen, covering the strikes and protests which are missed by the mainstream media.

We hope to carry the voices and stories of the women and men who are still fighting for bread, freedom and social justice to new audiences.

Our practical guides to campaigning and resources for activists aim to build a stronger solidarity movement.

Middle East Solidarity is a joint project of MENA Solidarity Network, Egypt Solidarity Initiative and Bahrain Watch, and is supported by funding from UCU, PCS, NUT and a number of Trades Union Councils and local trade union branches.

You can find out more about our campaigns online here:

www.menasolidaritynetwork.com
www.egyptsolidarityinitiative.org
www.bahrainwatch.org

Editors:

Anne Alexander
 Luke G.G. Bhatia
 John Horne

Publisher:

Middle East Solidarity Publications,
 MENA Solidarity Network,
 Unit 193, 15-17 Caledonian Road,
 London, N1 9DX
 Email: menasolidarity@gmail.com

Designer:

Ben Windsor



Ali al-Bazzaz

Bahraini cartoonist Ali al-Bazzaz was one of over sixty journalists sacked in 2011 during the crackdown against the pro-democracy uprising.

Al-Bazzaz, who worked for the pro-government newspaper Al Ayam, was fired after attending the Pearl Roundabout protest.

He has struggled to find employment since, despite the popularity of his work and his pointed political satire.

A short interview with al-Bazzaz, dubbed into English is available here: www.youtube.com/watch?v=b+JDMhLSIac

Middle East Solidarity is backed by

Strike

إضراب

Solidarity

تضامن



A LETTER TO MY BROTHER

Hanaa Soltan

DEAR MOHAMED,

I'm often asked why, and how, you've kept up your hunger strike for 14 months now, despite our pleas for you to end it. I've watched your body go from a plump basketball-playing frame to one that has withered down to its bones.

Your face, with its beautiful smile often grinning, now looks permanently in pain. And, all I can do to explain is to tell people that it's the only form of control you have to hold on to.

Last month, our father was sentenced to death. We weren't expecting it. I was told by the lawyers to expect a few years at most. I still have not recovered from the trauma of this.

On 26 January 2014, you began your hunger strike to help regain some form of control. You had been in jail for five months by then and said you had grown tired of complaining about receiving no medical care for both a potentially fatal pre-existing blood clot disorder, as well as the torture and ill-treatment you were subjected to when you were detained.

You described how officers used chains to beat your arm, where you still had stitches for a gunshot wound you received during the dispersal of the Rabaa sit-in by Egyptian security forces on 14 August 2013.

The beatings caused the stitches to open, leaving you susceptible to all kinds of dangerous infections. The beatings also caused the metal pins and plates in your arm to shift, cutting against nerves and muscles, causing great pain, for which you were allowed no medication or treatment. You could not even get X-rays done.

A doctor cellmate undertook ad hoc surgery using pliers and a razor with no anaesthesia or sterilization. You told President Barack Obama of this horror in a letter in November of 2013. He has yet to reply.

We have been so worried about you that we recently pressured you to consume liquids, because of your solitary confinement for 23 and a half hours a day and lack of medical care at Leiman Tora Prison.

Nevertheless, you hang on to the strike, because it is the only thing you can change and choose. You would have suffered a mental breakdown otherwise. I understand.

Your frail body belies a strong mind. I know you've grown very spiritual throughout this whole process. You read every novel and book that we send, multiple times over.

At times, the prison guards would prevent any new reading material coming into your cell, and it's at these times when you're most vulnerable to losing your grip. Reading and the hunger strike have been your main coping mechanisms. For us, choosing and sending you books has been one way to cope too.

For that half hour that you're allowed out from the cell, you try to get your blood flowing through basic physical therapy. Your legs have become too weak to stand or walk.

I imagine you also engage frequently with the guards and others. You're an incredibly social human being, and need to be around others. I imagine you using that half hour to get some much-needed human contact.

Throughout this 19-month ordeal, I have seen so much of humanity lost, but I have also been amazed at the good that exists in people the world over, and the power of our unity in humanity. It has many faces, and I am grateful for every single one.

Mohamed, you are blessed in many ways to have your story reach so many. There are at least 16,000 more prisoners in Egypt with stories like yours.

Your sister, and best friend,

HANAA

Hanaa's brother Mohamed was sentenced to 25 years in jail by an Egyptian court on 11 April 2015.

This is an edited version of a letter she published on Open Democracy and Amnesty International's websites on the eve of his sentencing. Amnesty is campaigning for Mohamed's immediate release.

Turn to page 26 for more on the campaign.



BAHRAIN

Naval base rewards UK silence on abuses Bahraini activist

The UK government announced on 5th December 2014 that it will station a naval base in Bahrain despite ongoing human rights violations.

Defence Secretary Michael Fallon said "this new base is a permanent expansion of the Royal Navy's footprint and will enable Britain to send more and larger ships to reinforce stability in the Gulf. We will now be based again in the Gulf for the long term."

The naval facility marks the first permanent British base East of the Suez Canal for over 40 years.

It will cost around £15m to construct, financed almost entirely by the Bahraini government.

Ali Abdulemam, a Bahraini activist and human rights defender commented "the Bahraini government's funding of the UK military



The UK navy has long been active in the Gulf. Thanks to the Bahraini government it will soon have a permanent base there once again | Photo: Wikimedia Commons

base represents a 'reward' for the UK government's silence on the ongoing political upheaval in Bahrain and well documented cases of human rights abuses, political prisoners and lack of political representation.

"Or in other words, the Bahraini government has managed to buy the silence of the UK government."

The base has sparked opposition in Parliament, with 56 MPs signing Early Day Motion 609.

The motion states: "this announcement will be deeply upsetting to all those who have suffered human rights abuses by the government of Bahrain and its officials, and will serve to send a message that the UK government is not interested in justice, rule

of law and reconciliation in Bahrain".

In March, Bahraini activist Moosa Mohammed said that he would seek a judicial review over the decision, citing the lack of a human rights review in advance of the agreement to build the base.

Under the UK government's Overseas Justice and Security Assistance Guidance the government must first "assess the internal situation in the host country, its stability, and its attitude towards human rights law and international humanitarian law."

The UK government claimed that the base "does not involve the provision of assistance to Bahrain, and

therefore no [human rights] assessment was required."

Defence analysts have remarked that the new naval base increases the possibility that a UK-government brokered deal to sell Typhoon fighter aircraft and other defence and security equipment to Bahrain will be successful.

The UK navy will join the US Fifth Fleet on the island, one of America's biggest naval deployments, as well as a Gulf Cooperation Council force, led by Saudi Arabia, that helped to put down the uprising in 2011 and remains in the country.

For more on the campaign against the British base go to www.menasolidaritynetwork.com

BAHRAIN

Activists remain in jail four years on

The Bahraini authorities continue to jail opposition activists and trade unionists, four years after the 2011 clampdown.

President of the Bahrain Center for Human Rights (BCHR), Nabeel Rajab is

in solitary confinement in prison.

This is due to comments made about Yemen - for: "disseminating false news in time of war, which may undermine preparations and war operations", and "openly discrediting a statutory entity".

He is awaiting trial on a number of charges.

Abdulahdi al-Khawaja, BCHR co-founder is serving a life sentence.

Mahdi Abu Deeb, president of the Bahrain Teachers' Association and

his colleague Jalila al-Salman were imprisoned after calling on teachers to strike in 2011.

Mahdi Abu Deeb remains in prison to this day.

Rula al-Saffar, president of the Bahrain Nursing Society was also imprisoned along with 52 other health professionals.

Approximately 4,500 workers were sacked during the period of "National Safety" in 2011, including 51 trade union leaders, 15 of whom were members of the executive committee of

the General Federation for Bahrain Trade Unions.

Silence over the repression from Western governments has emboldened the Bahraini regime.

The December 2014 arrest of Sheikh Ali Salman, leader of the opposition group Al-Wefaq, means that no high profile opposition leaders remain free.

He is currently in prison awaiting trial.





A protester in Salah-al-Din joins the campaign to raise the revolutionary flag, March 2015 | Photo: Council of Salah-al-Din Revolutionaries

SYRIA

Popular resistance continues under fire

Joseph Daher

Middle East Solidarity spoke to Switzerland-based Syrian revolutionary activist Joseph Daher about the situation in free areas of Syria on the fourth anniversary of the 2011 revolution.

You can read more of Joseph's reports on the Syriafreedomforever blog.

On the anniversary of the revolution, demonstrations and campaigns were organised by some popular councils, which are run by local people in regions free of the Assad regime forces and of its allies on one side and Islamic reactionary and jihadist forces on the other.

In the free neighbourhoods of Bustan Qasr, Salah al-Din and Masaken Hananou in the northern city of Aleppo, the Council of Revolutionaries of Aleppo organised mass street protests and a carnival – including theatre plays and

concerts, despite bombing by the regime.

Activists called on people to “raise the flag of your revolution,” in opposition to the flag of the Assad regime and the black flags of the Islamist groups Jabhat al-Nusra and ISIS.

Posters and graffiti with the flag and revolutionary martyrs also appeared in the streets of other areas, such as the Eastern Ghouta near Damascus and the Hama countryside.

In the city of Douma, hundreds of civilians protested.

A popular youth organisation called The Day After (TDA), which is present in some liberated areas, created a memorial for martyrs from the area, which listed 200 names of activists, civil defence workers, teachers,

photographers, aid workers, doctors and many others.

The same organisation was also behind the “Ishtiki” (Complain) campaign in the region of Ghouta.

This campaign encouraged local people to express any concerns about the behaviour of armed groups in their areas, and initiate action or dialogue to improve interactions between civilians and armed group members.

In West Ghouta TDA's organisation worked on a campaign to encourage children to go back to school.

Low school attendance, in particular by internally displaced children, is a large problem in many parts of the country.

Read more background at www.syriauntold.com

BACKSTORY

In 2011, a popular revolution calling for democracy, social justice and equality spread nation-wide.

The regime fought back viciously, and in the violence which followed, Islamist militias, with the tacit assistance of the Assad regime, crushed independent grassroots

revolutionary groups in areas which had been liberated.

By 2014, 9 million had fled their homes, almost half of Syria's population.

Regime forces surround and partially control the capital city, Damascus, and dominate the coastal plain and key cities such as Homs and Hama.

EGYPT

Strikes hit cement plants

Anne Alexander

Cement workers at five plants owned by Italian firm Italcementi have been at the forefront of a new wave of workers' protests and strikes in Egypt between February and April this year.

Although not on the scale of strikes last February over the minimum wage, and a long way below the peaks of social protests in 2011 and early 2013, the strikes continue the fight for better pay and conditions.

A strike at Italcementi's Helwan plant in February triggered a solidarity walkout of around 10,000 workers at the Al-Qitamiyya factory.

In late March, union committee members went into occupation at Al-Qitamiyya, while 800 workers surrounded management offices in Tora.

The action was coordinated by reps across the company's five Egyptian plants, who pledged to stand together against management's refusal to pay out profit-sharing bonuses.

Workers in the car industry, state-owned engineering contractors and bread distribution workers have also taken action recently.

On 12 April, workers occupied the Oil and Soap Company in Suez, in a bid to stop the factory's closure.



EGYPT

Sentenced to die after unfair trials

Anne Alexander

Over a year since a provincial court shocked the world by condemning 529 men to death for the same offence, Egypt's hanging judges continue to hand down capital sentences in trials which human rights organisations say are completely flawed.

The March 2014 ruling against the 529 men from Minya province was followed quickly by another case in the same court condemning 683 others to death.

Although the majority of the 1,212 death sentences were commuted to life imprisonment, 220 men remain under threat of execution.

Judge Mohamed Nagi Shehata, whose sentencing of three Al-Jazeera journalists was recently overturned, added a further 188 inmates to death row in December 2014.

The defendants were convicted of an attack on a police station in Kerdasa, Giza governorate, shortly after the overthrow of Mohamed Morsi by the military in July 2013.

Human Rights Watch condemned the proceedings as “blatantly unfair.”

Prominent figures in the Muslim Brotherhood, including the organisation's General Guide Mohamed Badie, have faced numerous capital charges.

By mid-April 2015, Badie had received four confirmed death sentences.

One of those facing execution is Salah Soltan, father of Mohamed Soltan, an American-Egyptian activist who was sentenced to life imprisonment in the same case on 11 April 2015.

The Soltans and their co-defendants were accused of organising an “operations room” during the Raba'a al-Adawiyya protest after the overthrow of Morsi.

Amnesty International has been campaigning for Mohamed's release.

“Mohamed Soltan should not have been in jail in the first place and what he is accused of should not be a criminal offence,” Amnesty International Middle East and North Africa Deputy Director Hassiba Hadj Sahraoui said in September 2014 statement.

On the eve of Mohamed's sentencing, Amnesty published a harrowing letter from his sister Hanaa, describing her agony at his plight.

Activists from Egyptian prisoners' rights group, Al-Hurriya lil-Gadaan (Freedom for the Brave), launched a campaign in April to highlight another case where tortured confessions before a military court resulted in seven death sentences, confirmed in March 2015.

At least two of the defendants in the “Arab Sharkas” case were convicted of taking part in attacks on security forces at a time when they were already held in custody.

In a statement which condemned the outcome of “an extraordinary trial that lacked the most basic elements of justice,” Al-Hurriya lil-Gadaan urged citizens to sign a petition calling for the executions to be suspended.

Read Hanaa Soltan's letter to her detained brother Mohamed on page 4.

EGYPT

Anti-terror laws extend clampdown

Sherif Azer

Middle East Solidarity spoke to Egyptian human rights activist Sherif Azer about the impact of new “anti-terror” laws on human rights in Egypt.

On 17 February 2015, Egyptian President Abdelfattah al-Sisi passed Law 8/2015, also known as the Law on Terrorist Entities.

The law's vague wording means that Egyptian prosecutors could use it to designate human rights organisations, political parties, or even trade unions as “terrorist organisations.”

The Egyptian Constitution of 2014 gives the right to the President of the Republic to act as the legislator in the absence of the elected Parliament.

Egypt's last parliament was dissolved in 2012 based on a ruling by the Supreme Constitutional Court.

Since then, many laws which contradict international human rights standards have been passed, first by President Adly Mansour and later by Sisi, including the controversial anti-protest law which has been widely used to jail opposition activists.

The anti-terrorism law preserves the same catastrophic legal provisions found in a previous bill, while adding several overly broad terms in its definition of terrorist entities.

It erodes the guarantees of civil rights enshrined in the Egyptian constitution and Egypt's international commitments.

It also undermines freedom of peaceful assembly, freedom to form civic associations and political parties, and freedom of the press, opinion, and expression.

The law could be applied to individuals even if they belong to no organisation.

The law relies on a broad, vague definition of actions on the basis of which individuals or groups may be designated terrorists.

Under this definition, human rights defenders, political parties, trade unions or development associations may be easily labeled terrorist entities and their members terrorists.

According to Article 1 of the law, anyone “infringing the public order, endangering the safety, interests, or security of society, obstructing provisions of the constitution and law, or harming national unity, social peace, or national security,” can be designated a terrorist.

Those who simply advocate such acts “by any means”, may also be designated “terrorists”. The law does not only apply to those calling for, or using violence or armed force.

It could cover any statements, reports, protests, or newspaper articles deemed to constitute “an infringement of the public order or social peace.”

Egypt has laws to counter crimes of armed violence by extremist groups and organisations.

It is highly doubtful that this law was actually issued to counter terrorism.

Rather, it makes the task of cracking down on political organisations and individuals who practice any kind of peaceful opposition even easier.

Take action now: see page 26

KUWAIT

Stateless Bedoon call for rights

John Horne

The protest movement that began in February 2011 by Kuwaiti Bedoon went largely unreported amidst the wider regional turbulence of the Arab uprisings.

Their renewed struggle for the basic right of citizenship continues to this day, amidst reports that the Kuwaiti government is plotting to offload them to Comoros in Africa.

The Bedoon are stateless Kuwaitis, who are subjected to structural discrimination and the institutionalised deprivation of rights.

Estimates vary, but according to Human Rights Watch there are at least 105,700 Bedoon in Kuwait and perhaps as many as 200,000, representing around 10% of the population.

Estimates are complicated by the fact that Kuwaiti authorities refuse to give Bedoon birth or death certificates.

The Bedoon are largely people who have lived in Kuwait for decades (if not longer), but originally found themselves stateless after they failed to be registered as citizens during the Kuwaiti government's preparations for Independence from the British in 1961.

The consequences for them and their children have been grave.

Although initially the Bedoon had access to basic services such as health and education, these too were stripped from them in the 1980s and 1990s after



State repression has been harsh | Photo: Mohd Al-Salem

the government launched a xenophobic campaign and recategorised them as "illegal residents".

They were left literally without rights, barred from taking public sector jobs and plunged into economic destitution.

In early 2011, thousands of Bedoon began defying the ban on protests and took to the streets in the face of violent state repression.

The Kuwaiti government eventually made some concessions, but refused to implement the Bedoon's simple demand for citizenship.

They are under no international pressure to end this discrimination against their own people: Kuwait's regional and Western allies have been silent on the issue of statelessness.

Recently, Kuwait's Interior Ministry announced plans to offer Bedoon "economic citizenship" in the impoverished African nation Comoros.

The details of the plan currently remain opaque, but it follows a similar deal struck between the United Arab Emirates and Comoros.

There are fears that Kuwait may take this as an opportunity to deport the Bedoon or pressure them into taking the Comorian citizenship.

Bedoon activists in Kuwait continue to struggle for their rights, despite the great risks in speaking out.

This year one such activist was jailed for a year for protesting, with the threat that he will be deported to an unknown country upon release.

MOROCCO

Civil servants lead pensions strike

Mohamed Boutayeb

Civil servants from different government departments and public services, joined service users, workers, unemployed organisations, the Moroccan Human Rights Association, Attac Morocco and student activists, in responding to the call of the Union Federation of Civil Servants – Democratic Current (UFCS-DC), for a national demonstration on 2 April 2015.

The protest began in the heart of the capital city, Rabat, and marched towards the parliament buildings under the slogan: "The united struggle continues against attacks on workers' rights and freedoms."

The demonstration was accompanied by a national civil service strike, responding to the government's failure to respect workers' rights and in response to its preparations for an offensive on pension rights, pay and social benefits.

Participants in the march chanted slogans warning about the attacks. They called for serious dialogue across all sectors, beginning with the demands of public sector workers, education and health workers, small farmers and other public services.

A statement from the UFCS-DC demanded that union leaders launch an escalating campaign of militant action, instead of participating in "deceptive" social dialogue negotiations with the government.



Demonstrating in Casablanca in 2011 | Photo: Magharebia @ Flickr

Repression and resistance in Morocco

Andy Reid from the PCS union interviews Moroccan trade union activist Mohamed Boutayeb

Andy Reid from PCS union interviewed Moroccan civil servant and trade unionist Mohamed Boutayeb, a former leading student activist and political prisoner, and a member of the revolutionary socialist group, Al-Mounadil-a.

Mohamed was jailed by the Moroccan authorities between 2004 and 2007 for his activism on campus.

He lives in Rabat, and is an official representative of the Democratic Current and a member of the main union council of the Union Marocain du Travail (UMT). The UMT is one of three trade union federations in Morocco and has a membership of around 300,000. Interview translated by Anne Alexander.

How do you see the prospects for solidarity relations between the trade union movements in Morocco and Britain?

We need to discuss building solidarity links between the trade union movement in Britain and the democratic, progressive trend in the Moroccan trade union movement.

This could start by exchanging information about issues facing the movements in the two countries, and learning about each other's struggles. We are facing a lot of difficulties in Morocco at the moment because of attacks from the neoliberal regime, and this is something which you in Britain are facing as well.

We also face the issue of repression of trade union activism by the state in Morocco. For example, workers are banned from establishing trade union offices,

despite the fact that the law is supposed to allow workers to form trade unions. But in practice you don't get permission.

We really need the solidarity and support from comrades in the British trade unions against the repression which we are facing from the state and the bosses.

The Moroccan state is bringing in a law which allows the government to interfere in internal trade affairs, through the supervision of trade union funds, under the pretext that the Moroccan state is a democratic state so it claims the right to intervene in trade union affairs.

Another very dangerous law is being brought in concerning the right to strike, which bans solidarity strikes. Activists in Britain can play a big role in spreading news throughout the trade union movement about what is happening in Morocco.

What is the relationship between the attacks on trade union freedoms of repression of trade unionists and austerity and neoliberal policies?

The rapid implementation of neoliberal policies means that the state and the bosses want to end workers' resistance, so the two things go together.

They cannot bring in neoliberal policies without repression of the trade union movement and workers' activism and strikes. For example, we have a law which was passed in 1967 containing the principle that wages cannot be paid without work, thus allowing the

government to withhold wages from striking workers in order to force them not to take part in strike action.

Previous governments did not implement this principle, or only rarely, but the current government has been implementing it in order to stop civil servants from taking part in strikes.

Has privatisation been a mechanism for breaking up centres of union power in the public sector? Our experience in Britain is that the trade unions are much stronger in the public sector than the private sector.

Yes, the same is true in Morocco, aided by the break-up of the industrial sector, particularly in textiles. The last seven or eight years in the textile industry has fragmented under the pressure of competition from the Chinese textile industry with the liberalisation of export markets.

In 2013, according to official statistics 126,000 textile workers lost their jobs. The transport sector has been completely privatised and wages are very low as a result. However, transport workers are well organised. They participated strongly in the general strike of 29 October 2014, and played a key role in its success.

Another factor which weakens trade union organisation is casualisation, particularly in the private sector. Sixty-five percent of wage workers in Morocco do not have a contract, so it is very difficult for them to join unions.

Trade union work in the private sector is stifled because of pressure from the bosses in both the agricultural sector or the industrial sector. They are lobbying the government to implement the law on strikes, which bans solidarity action, and bans political strikes, and creates a number of barriers and restrictions to make it more difficult to strike.

Can you say something about your experience in the government sector in terms of resistance to privatisation and austerity?

In the government sector the trade unions are not very big. Trade unions are represented, and in some sectors they are stronger, such as in the education sector. There are around 300,000 teachers for example, and they have experienced a lot of problems in relation to wages and working conditions. There have been a lot of strikes in the education sector.

Likewise in the health sector, workers there such as doctors and nurses have been active. However there haven't been protests against privatisation, unfortunately. Rather, we've seen strikes for more sectional demands, such pay or working conditions.

There have also been militant struggles by court workers, even including the judges, who came out into the streets for the first time in Moroccan history after the 20th February 2011 in very large protests.

They attempted to form a union, but the constitution bans judges from forming a union, so they set up an association. The government massively raised the judges' pay in order to quieten their movement and to

BACKSTORY

The rising tide of protest across the Arab world in early 2011 sent shockwaves through Morocco, triggering a movement calling for democratic reforms and social justice.

Inspired by the success of street protests and strikes against the regimes in Tunisia and Egypt, the 20 February movement demanded the dissolution of parliament, a democratic constitution, the official recognition of Amazigh, the language of Morocco's Berber population, and the release of political prisoners.

Protests spread like wildfire, reaching around 100 towns and cities at the height of the movement.

The regime manoeuvred to regain the initiative, announcing some reforms in March, and playing divide and rule tactics.

Leaders of the main trade union federations agreed a secret deal to walk away from the protests in return for major pay increases.

Debates over whether to push for radical change, or settle for more modest reforms, began to divide the movement, while repression increased.

Yet although the massive protests of 2011 have receded, other struggles continue.

Public sector strikes in February 2013, October 2014 and April 2015 have brought tens of thousands onto the streets to challenge the regime's neoliberal policies and the clampdown on trade union rights.

ensure the support of the judiciary for the government's policies. There are around 16,000 court workers, and they were involved in a number of very strong strikes led by their union called the Democratic Organisation for Justice. They even occupied the courts, winning huge concessions from the state.

Are there particular challenges Moroccan activists are facing as they try to build the trade union movement?

Trade unionism in Morocco is characterised by a degree of sectionalism so we don't see demands which unite the whole workers' movement having much resonance, such as demands against privatisation, demands against debt, resistance to the break-up of the public sector, resistance to attacks on trade union freedoms.

For example the general strike on 29 October last year succeeded because the government wants to reduce wages by about 25 percent and is trying add five extra years to the retirement age in the government sector. Really the issue of pensions was crucial, if it hadn't been for that it would have been much harder to make the strike a success.

You can read a longer version of this interview online at www.menasolidaritynetwork.com

Challenging sexual violence in Tahrir: the story of OpAntiSH

Journalist and human rights campaigner **Nadine Marroushi** tells the inspiring story of how Egyptian activists fought back collectively against sexual assault by the state and harassment in the streets.

This story begins in Tahrir Square on 25 January 2011, at the start of the Egyptian revolution. Millions of people camped out in the streets and protested for 18 days, fighting off the police to eventually bring down a regime that had been in place for nearly 30 years.

I've heard over and over again from women who were in the Square during the 18 days that they experienced a feeling of safety and unity. There were no reported incidents of women being harassed by men. Women felt very much that their place was in the Square, their voice mattered there.

Women and men, young and old, Muslim and Christian came together to demand "bread, freedom and social justice" and the downfall of the regime. And on 11 February 2011 Mubarak stepped down.

Now let me fast-forward two years, and take you to a different scene in Tahrir Square. It's one that's darker and more sinister, particularly for women.

This is a testimony from an unnamed



Graffiti in Mohamed Mahmoud Street, central Cairo depicts Egyptian soldiers pulling the clothes off a woman protester in December 2011 | Photo: Anne Alexander

woman who survived a sexual violence attack in Tahrir Square on 25 January 2013:

"I went to Tahrir Square at about 6pm because I wanted the Revolution to continue, and I was opposed to the Muslim Brotherhood's rule... We stayed for about an hour to an hour and a half and were about to leave... Seconds later, after we took about two steps, a circle of men was formed around me.

"The last thing I heard was 'don't worry', followed by screaming... I then felt hands all over my body, tearing down my trousers and long jacket... I felt hands touch me from all directions,

and I was moved, almost carried, inside the circle as people continued saying: 'don't worry'. They were saying that while violating me..."

"After this incident, I am even more determined to go back to Tahrir and to protest. The only solution is to shame and expose them."

Her experience isn't unique. From the moment Mubarak stepped down reports of women being violently sexually assaulted by mobs of what appeared to be ordinary bystanders of men in Tahrir Square surfaced and became more frequent. This is a problem that has continued four years on.

In this article, I will focus on one particular aspect of women’s experience and participation in the revolution: how they came to confront the issue of public incidents of sexual violence.

I will start with a brief history of the problem of violence against women in public spaces, and how grassroots movements came to tackle this issue in the wake of the 2011 uprising, focussing on one particular movement: the Operation Anti-Sexual Harassment/ Assault Initiative, also known as OpAntiSH.

In the movement, men and women came together to confront mob sexual assaults of women in Tahrir Square at risk to their own lives, and in a way that broke gender boundaries amongst the activists, and really changed how a lot of the men in the group thought about a women’s participation in the revolution.

At the same time as doing that the movement also helped really bring the issue to the forefront of public discussion through media interviews and talking about it on television. For that reason, it’s quite special.

Sexual harassment and violence are issues that affect all women in Egypt, young or old, rich or poor, secular or Islamist, Muslim or Christian, foreign or Egyptian, veiled or unveiled.

In fact, a United Nations study published in 2013 found that 99.3 percent of all women in Egypt had experienced some form of sexual harassment with groping, or touching a woman’s body, being the most common form.

It was also the issue that touched me most personally when I lived and worked as a journalist in Cairo between 2011 and 2014.



A poster asks: “Are you a man, or a harassing monster?” | Photo: Anne Alexander

I was groped in demonstrations and verbally harassed on a daily basis no matter how conservatively I dressed and by all ages of males – young and old – children and middle aged men.

Under Mubarak, who ruled from 1981, incidents of sexual assault against women were rarely discussed or documented, except in the context of female detainees.

In the late 2000s, particularly from 2004, things started to change. It was a period of increased pro-democracy movements and activism and protests in Egypt.

In 2004, the Kefaya, or Egyptian Movement for Change, had formed. It called for political reform and opposed the Mubarak regime.

A group of activists came together and decided that enough was enough

On 25 May 2005, the day voters were asked to approve a change to the constitution, a small group of protesters met in Downtown Cairo, only a few minutes away from Tahrir Square. An army of riot police and undercover security agents greeted them. Women were groped and beaten as part of an attack on the political protesters. Images emerged of women being hit and sexually abused, which is considered particularly offensive in Egypt’s conservative Muslim society.

The following year, in 2006, women were sexually harassed by groups of young men in Downtown Cairo during the public holiday of Eid. Media reports at the time said that policemen just stood by and watched.

Then we get to the revolution of 2011. As I noted earlier, Tahrir Square, the central space for the revolution, was a safe space for women. That in itself, as many revolutionaries I’ve spoken to note, was quite unique and significant.

But it all changed on the night that Mubarak stepped down on 11 February. Everyone was jubilant and celebrating, and the protesters no longer controlled the Square through a series of checkpoints.

This was when Lara Logan, a South African journalist reporting for an American news channel, was sexually assaulted by mobs of men in Tahrir.

On 9 March 2011, several young Egyptian women were arrested as part

of a crackdown by the army on a sit-in protest in Tahrir Square.

Samira Ibrahim was among a number of women who were detained and beaten, given electric shocks, strip-searched and subjected to “virginity tests”.

While such tests had in the past taken place, female victims did not speak-out against them for fear of being publicly shamed.

However, in a rare move, Ibrahim publicly spoke out about the tests she was subjected to and placed the case in front of a civilian court.

The head of Egypt’s military intelligence at the time, and Egypt’s current President AbdelFattah al-Sisi, told Amnesty International the tests had been carried out on female detainees to “protect” the army against possible allegations of rape, but that such forced tests would not be carried out again and that the army would avoid detaining women in the future.

A court order in December 2011 was issued to stop the practice of virginity tests; however, in March 2012 a military court acquitted the army doctor who conducted the tests from the charge of public obscenity laid against him. The decision could not be appealed. The court even denied the tests took place, despite the 2011 ruling.

In another incident, in December 2011, army officers were caught on camera beating female protesters with sticks and stamping on them while they lay on the ground. One woman was stripped half naked, revealing her blue bra, by army officers as they beat her.

Despite Sisi’s promises to Amnesty International, the army continued to detain women and sexual violence was used against them.

So we see a repeated pattern that began before the 2011 revolution, continued after, and possibly became worse as more women took to the streets to protest.

This pattern is one of sexual violence used by the state as a political tool to repress society through women, and day-to-day sexual harassment by ordinary men who know that they can get away with it in a society that usually puts the blame and shame on a woman, not the man.

In November 2012, Yasmine El Baramawy, a female Egyptian activist, went on television and spoke about her experience of sexual assault in Tahrir



Anti-sexual harassment graffiti in Mohamed Mahmoud Street, June 2013 | Photo: Anne Alexander

Square. It was unprecedented. Women just didn’t talk about it so publicly. It was considered too shameful to do so, but she broke that taboo.

After this, a group of activists came together and decided that enough was enough and that this was a problem that needed to be addressed.

The decision by activists to hold a public meeting about the issue came after a series of long battles many of the group of activists had been fighting for many years, the core of this group founded OpAntiSH.

Each of them had either worked on resolving the epidemic of sexual harassment in Egyptian society since before the revolution, or they had experienced incidents of sexual harassment and assault during protests after the revolution, or they had been working on fighting human rights violations committed by the state before and after the revolution.

Some of them were gender and queer rights activists who supported this nascent women’s rights movement for obvious reasons.

So in November 2012, the first OpAntiSH meeting was announced on Facebook. It was held in a backroom of the offices of the Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights, a human rights group in Cairo just walking distance from the Square.

The room was packed with young people, women and men. They decided after the first meeting that they would position themselves in Tahrir Square the next time a mass demonstration was going to be held there so that they could keep it a safe space for women.

They divided themselves up into teams of volunteers. There was the

team that would hand out leaflets in the Square that advertised the hotline in case they saw or experience an incident of sexual harassment or assault.

There was the safety kit team who would be positioned in the Square with a bag that contained things a woman might need immediately after being subjected to sexual harassment, for example, some clothes, if her own clothes were torn, a hairbrush, some basic medicines, wipes etc.

There were people manning an operation room and taking calls from the hotline. They would then communicate any calls to volunteers on the ground.

Only women can decide where their place should be

There were people in safe houses where the volunteers could take women after they had been brought out of the Square so that they could recover. And then there was the intervention team: the team of people who would go into the mob attack and get the woman out.

One of the things that distinguished OpAntiSH from the other groups that tried to do something similar, such as a group called Tahrir Bodyguards, is that women and men joined the intervention team.

Women went in there knowing that they were at risk of being sexually assaulted themselves, and many of them were, as were the men too by the way.

After Morsi’s removal and a government took over led by Egypt’s now president AbdelFattah al-Sisi, OpAntiSH ceased to operate as an action force on the ground.

The environment for activists turned from bad to worse as they were being rounded up along with members of the Muslim Brotherhood or suspected sympathisers.

All the while mob sexual violence attacks on women continue. We saw at least 9 women being attacked in June 2014 during Sisi’s presidential win and inauguration.

The state’s response to all of this of course has been mainly lip service to the issue without actually dealing with its core problems, including the fact that the state itself and the arms of the state, including the police and the army are perpetrators of sexual violence crimes.

So what can we learn from the experience of the OpAntiSH initiative?

Well, firstly, that no one has the right to choose and decide where a woman’s place should be. Only women can decide that for themselves.

Some women accept that they don’t have the skills to fight off sexual violence with their bodies and hands but use their skills in other ways. Others feel they are ready and only the person themselves can decide, man or woman. A woman should always decide her place in society for herself.

Secondly, that it doesn’t take much to make a change. You just have to want to make a change and act upon it.

All it took was a group of young people to decide that enough was enough and that something had to be done. They called their friends, they sent out emails, and they got a group of people together.

By the end of it, people from all walks of life were coming to join and volunteer with the group – people that had no connection with the core group of activists and friends that founded it.

Thirdly, we need to keep supporting these people in their struggle. OpAntiSH had the ability to spread across Egypt and had it done so, then it would have been a force to be reckoned with.

Unfortunately, the environment in Egypt has just become too repressive and dangerous for activists to be present in large numbers on the ground.

However, OpAntiSH continues to exist as an online group of members and it releases statements taking positions on various issues related to gender rights violations in the name of the group.

OpAntiSH website:
www.facebook.com/opantish

TUNISIA

Teachers strike for education reform

Mokhtar Ben Hafsa

Mokhtar Ben Hafsa is a member of the Tunisian Secondary School Teachers Union (SGES).

Our strike at the beginning of March took place in the context of a series of mobilisations which we have seen in the secondary education sector in the recent period, and which have continued to escalate.

Secondary school teachers took two days of strike action at the beginning of the school year, during which they organised a rally outside the parliament buildings where the MPs from the Popular Front took part to show their solidarity.

They met with the Speaker of Parliament, who promised that the new government would follow up on their demands as soon as it met.

When these promises were not fulfilled, they organised another strike in February this year, with a further rally.

Then the Secondary Education Committee, an elected body composed of delegates from the national leadership of the teachers' union and union representatives from all the 24 provinces, decided to escalate the action by announcing an exam boycott.

Teachers' main demands are to improve pay after years of decline in relation to prices and for the radical



Students show their support for their striking teachers Photo: Union Solidarity International



reform of the Tunisian education system.

Since the beginning of structural adjustment reforms in the 1990s Tunisian schools have suffered collapsing infrastructure and curricula.

But successive governments, including those which came to power after the revolution, have considered secondary schools and other social services, to be a severe burden on the public budget, and have thus deepened austerity and cuts from one year to the next.

They also want a new law to protect the education system and to criminalise assaults against the different people within the system: teachers, students, workers and administrators.

It is notable that violent assaults on teachers have spread in recent years, both inside the school and outside it.

At the same time, a large proportion of young people are getting involved with drugs and violence, and lacking confidence in what

they learn at school.

Others have fallen prey to frustration and despair, leading to suicide or truancy, all of which is a sign of the collapse of the education system.

Teachers in Tunisian secondary schools have deep-rooted traditions of trade union, social and political struggles.

It was secondary school teachers who were the first group in the public sector to organise a general strike in 1975.

There have also been political strikes, including even a strike against normalisation with the Zionist state in 2005, when Ben Ali issued an invitation to Ariel Sharon to take part in the Information Summit, or the strike of 27 October 2010, just before the revolution began.

The level of participation in the March 2015 strike was an incredibly high 95 percent.

Around 5,000 teachers from across the country took part in the rally outside

parliament.

The exam boycott was also completely solid, even though the Minister kept promising parents that the exams would go ahead.

Some sections of the media have been running a fierce campaign against the teachers.

It has even reached the stage where some teachers have been assaulted and insulted.

Some families also took their children out of school in protest at the exam boycott.

But we have the backing of the main trade unions, and there is a section of public opinion and the media which is sympathetic, and we have even seen a number of student initiatives to support their teachers.

The government rushed to make concessions, offering an agreement to meet some of our financial demands and this is encouraging others to strike, including primary school teachers and university lecturers.



Egyptian protesters raise placards against sectarianism outside the national TV building in Maspero, Cairo on 13 May 2011 | Photo: Hossam el-Hamalawy

Sectarianism and the Counter-Revolution

Across the Middle East, sectarian tensions between Sunni and Shi'a Muslims, or between Muslims and Christians are often cited as the underlying reason for conflict and unrest. Sameh Naguib from the Egyptian Revolutionary Socialists and Syrian revolutionary activist Joseph Daher put forward an alternative analysis during discussions at the conference on the 'Arab Uprisings Four Years On' held in February.

Egypt's sectarian state was challenged by the revolution

Sameh Naguib

The current population of Egypt is around 90 million people. Between 10-15 percent of these people are Coptic Orthodox Christians, which is the main religious minority in Egypt. There are other minorities but they are much smaller in size.

The Coptic community has seen

different periods throughout its history. Since Islam entered Egypt there have been periods of discrimination and sectarian violence.

But in the modern era, in the last few decades, things have developed in a completely different and new way with the development of capitalism and particularly neoliberalism.

One of the main features of capitalist development in a country like Egypt is urbanisation – the move from rural areas to the cities.

In Egypt, this involved the move of millions of people from the south and rural regions to the cities, particularly Cairo and Alexandria. This move obviously involved both Christians, from the minority, and Muslims, from the majority.

With neoliberalism, the state stopped providing services to the majority of people living in slum areas in the big urban areas.

Health services, education, and

so forth, were taken away under neoliberal austerity measures, so the only providers of these services became either the mosque or the church. This started creating segregation between the two communities.

As neoliberal reforms accelerated, especially in the last ten years of Mubarak's rule, this segregation became a severe aspect of life for the majority of poor people in Egypt.

Poor Christians had to go to the church for education facilities, for health facilities, for financial help – even blankets in Winter. And similarly Muslims went to the mosque.

This created a space in which sectarianism grew very rapidly which exploded with the revolution. Suddenly you had Christian poor people with Muslim poor people, going out in revolt together.

This meant that the movement had a secular, democratic aspect to it, which made it impossible for Islamists, for

example, to try and separate the two communities.

Being a central aspect of the revolution, this did not just mean simply that Christian as citizens participated, it meant that Christians as an oppressed minority started having their own demonstrations against particular things that were taking place against them, for example churches being burned and different forms of oppression.

They started having massive demonstrations, involving tens of thousands of people. This was a serious problem, for the Church hierarchy, the Muslim Brotherhood and the Egyptian army.

The Christian mass movement developed during the rule of the Supreme Council of Armed Forces (SCAF), which included Sisi at that time.

The way the regime dealt with this was extreme violence. They attacked these demonstrators and killed scores of them.

They even had a statement on television by one of the military generals claiming that the army was under attack from the Christian community, which called for Muslims to go out and protect the army from the Christians.

It was a clear sectarian policy, so any talk about Sisi and the army being somehow secular in the face of the Muslim Brotherhood or in the face of Islamists has no basis at all. The Egyptian state is a state based on sectarianism.

The previous system of control, where the president would deal with the main religious figures from each community when there were problems, broke down completely in the revolution.

One of the aims of the Army in the first period when SCAF ruled was to return to that old system. This is why Sisi, in nearly all of his speeches, talks about the army protecting Copts and about Islamists being a threat to national unity between Christians and Muslims.

Indeed, in Sisi’s main speech in 2013 when he announced the coup, next to him was the Coptic Pope supporting the coup directly. This gave the signal that the army protects the Copts as long as they remain within the framework of the Church: as long as they stop going



Protesting in Maspero against the oppression of Coptic Christians, 8 May 2011
Photo: Hossam el-Hamalawy

to Tahrir Square and don’t appear again on the political scene.

Now you have a situation where the Muslim Brotherhood on one hand say “the coup has been supported by the Christians, so this shows that our Islamism and our position on the Christians is right – we need to be careful of the Copts”, while the army is saying they are protecting the Copts, they are protecting the minority.

So this minority becomes a main political ally of the army. And the argument is made simply by the regime. Sisi comes out and says this openly: “Do you want to be like the Christians in Syria? In Iraq, most Christians have left or been killed. Do you want to be like this?”

His argument is that the Muslim Brotherhood is Daesh (ISIS). He claims that if the revolution continues, Egypt will only face more Islamists, and become more like Syria, Iraq and Libya and the army is protecting the population from this horrible future.

This is how they continue to maintain support for the coup. They openly say that Egypt isn’t particularly democratic right now, but there is a terrorist threat and the only way to face this threat is to allow the army to do its job.

Therefore not only are the Muslim Brotherhood labelled as Daesh, anybody who stands against the army - anybody who tries to stand for democratic rights and workers’ rights – is said to be against unity of the country and trying to destroy unity between Christians and Muslims.

If you want to strike or demonstrate at university, you are viewed as aiding the terrorists.

The regime has used this to build up a middle-class frenzy that includes, regretfully, a large part of the Coptic community.

They are really scared – and they have a right to be scared – of Islamism. They look at churches torched, houses burned down, Christians murdered in horrendous ways or having to leave their country.

These fears were extremely powerful in pushing large numbers of Christians to support the military coup.

One thing that one learns from these developments is that the question of oppression of minorities is central to the revolution and the counter-revolution. This is something we need to learn from for the future.

If you don’t have as a central plank of any revolutionary strategy the question of the oppression of minorities, if you lose the chance to win these oppressed minorities over, they will be used against the revolution.

And so in preparation for the second revolution, in the case of Egypt, the Coptic question needs to be at the very centre of any revolutionary programme.

Syria, Iraq and the rise of ISIS

Joseph Daher

We must be careful when speaking of Islamic fundamentalism or Islamism in an European context, to not fall into the mainstream orientalist and racist atmosphere against Muslim communities in Europe.

We have to fight against orientalism and racism and show that Daesh (ISIS) cannot be understood by reading the Koran or by going back to Islamic history. Trying to find reasons for ISIS in the religion doesn’t make any sense. It’s a form of essentialism.

At the same time, I think it’s our duty to be careful not to fall into orientalism in reverse, in other words to consider Political Islam as the popular culture of the people of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), and also to suggest that any kind of Muslim believer is therefore an Islamist. This is also wrong. For example, we often hear the media say that you have the liberals, the left and the Muslims. But the liberals and the left can also be Muslims.

Sectarianism has been claimed to be

something that has existed throughout history in the MENA.

It is suggested that contemporary hatred between Sunni and Shi’a is because 1,400 years ago they had a dispute and what is happening in Iraq, Lebanon or Bahrain is a consequence of this.

Therefore, sectarianism has been considered as a remnant of past history, preventing the modernisation of these countries, whilst also being something that is rooted in the people of this region. I disagree strongly with this interpretation.

That doesn’t mean that there wasn’t any kind of religious discrimination before, but the way you understand sectarianism today is by understanding that it is a product of modernity.

Sectarianism has not only been used by Islamic fundamentalist forces, but very often by authoritarian regimes in the region.

An example of this is the Syrian regime. A lot of people, in Western media but also helped by the counter-revolutionary monarchies of the Gulf, take an essentialist perspective and see the Syrian revolution as a Sunni uprising against a regime run by the Alawite Muslim minority.

This is not an Alawite regime, it is a regime built on a different basis of power. It does have a quasi dominant component of Alawites in the military and security services in the composition of their leadership, but it is also based on the Sunni and Christian bourgeoisie and large sectors of the middle classes of Damascus and Aleppo.

The regime can be characterised as a bourgeois, clientelist, military regime that has used sectarianism and even Arab chauvinism to divide people.

Some analysis of the Syrian uprising considers Sunnis as oppressed and Alawites as privileged, but the second most impoverished area of Syria was the Alawite mountains. The first was the Kurdish majority region in the North East region.

It is important to understand the rise of ISIS and other fundamentalist groups with the strategy of the Assad regime.

While the latter was saying the revolution was a Sunni Islamist fundamentalist uprising and constantly crushing democratic, secular activists, three months after

the uprising started, Assad liberated all of the Salafist and reactionary groups from prisons.

The majority of the leadership of different Islamic fundamentalist battalions were inside prison at the beginning of the revolution.

We can’t understand ISIS without also coming back to the history of Iraq. ISIS can’t be understood in reading the Koran, as some essentialist and racist people try to claim. The leadership of ISIS are mostly ex-Baathist military commanders.

I would categorise this organisation as a totalitarian organisation with a military dynamic. It’s not based on a popular movement but on military domination and complete repression to impose its power, not on any kind of power from below.

The reason for the establishment and growth of ISIS stems from various reasons. Firstly, from the policies of Saddam Hussain. Even though it was a so-called nationalist regime it used sectarianism, for example calling Shi’a Iraqis the fifth column of Iran, imposing harsh chauvinism against Kurds, and so forth.

ISIS can’t be understood in reading the Koran, as some essentialist and racist people try to claim.

Of course, 10 years of economic sanctions after 1991 completely destroyed the Iraqi social fabric and Iraqi society.

The British and American invasion took this process further, causing a humanitarian catastrophe.

American and British imperialists brought back to Iraq and collaborated with, the worst fundamentalist, reactionary and corrupted political groups.

The policy of the US was to enforce a sectarian political system, like in Lebanon. Furthermore, trade unions were repressed, neoliberal policies were implemented and so forth.

There were also interventions from regional actors, like the Gulf monarchies who funded Islamic fundamentalist groups inside Iraq.

On the other side, there was the role of Iran in assisting the Maliki government and also Hezbollah intervening inside Iraq.

Between 2011 and 2013, a popular movement in Iraq, mostly based in Sunni populated areas, with national and democratic demands, was completely crushed by the Maliki government.

They were accused of being terrorists. As soon as you’re against the regime, you’re accused of being a terrorist. In Syria, Egypt and Iraq, it’s always the same.

ISIS was able to expand out of the frustrations of a small section of the Sunni minority. In June 2014, a coalition of different Sunni reactionary forces – Baath, tribal forces and ISIS – were able to take Mosul.

But it wasn’t a popular uprising as they said. A popular uprising would not have resulted in 500,000 people leaving Mosul directly. It was a complete military takeover.

In the beginning it was viewed by some as a liberation because the Iraqi army was considered as corrupt, sectarian and oppressing the people of the city.

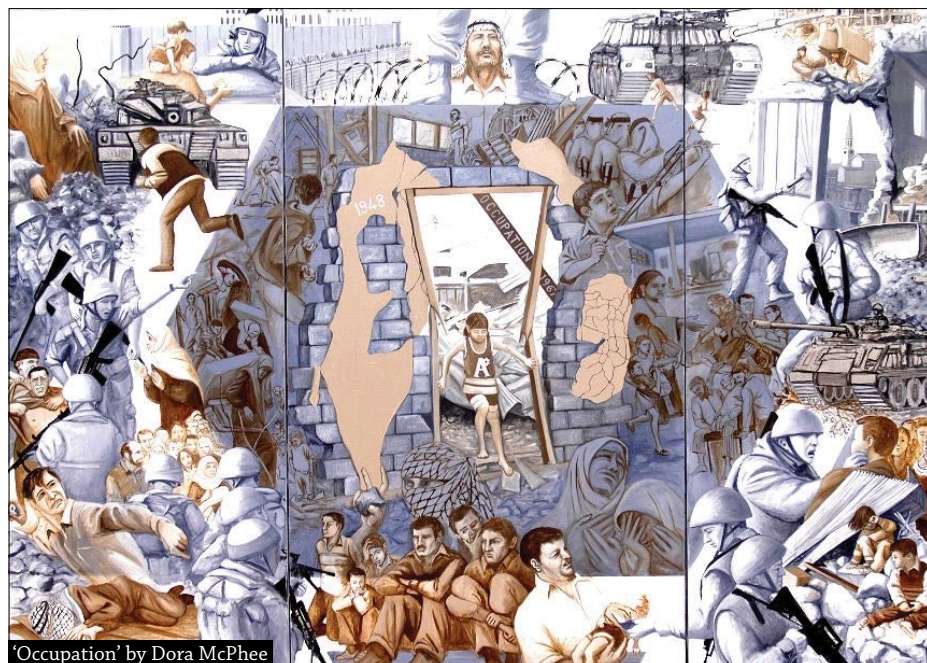
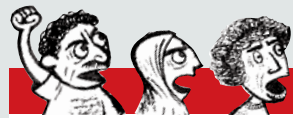
But as soon as ISIS crushed the rest of the coalition, it became deeply repressive. This has been the case wherever ISIS expanded. It has been based not on a popular movement from below, but on a military perspective with harsh repression.

Counter-revolutionary forces, whether being authoritarian regimes or Islamic fundamentalist forces, have used sectarianism to divide the people. The struggle against sectarianism is part of the class-struggle.

The role of the left is to create an independent, large, democratic and progressive force to face these two counter-revolutionary forces.



A poster illustrates the role of Assad and the media in whipping up sectarianism to derail the Syrian revolution | Photo: Kafrenbelposters



BDS gathers pace on campus

John Horne

Activists at SOAS, University of London, won a significant victory in February when a campus-wide referendum voted overwhelmingly to endorse an academic boycott of Israel.

73 percent of voters backed the motion to sever links with Israeli institutions, such as the Hebrew University.

The 'Yes' Campaign described it as "a historic victory for the boycott, divestment and sanctions (BDS) movement" which "reinforces the demands of the BDS call issued in 2005 by Palestinian civil society organisations."

Activists at SOAS hope the success of their campaign will inspire similar actions across British campuses.

A historic result

In a statement, the Palestine Society and BDS Campaign at SOAS said: "The historic result has brought us one step further in our struggle for freedom and justice.

"We call upon other universities to show their solidarity by joining the academic boycott."

They stress that the academic boycott "targets Israeli institutions complicit in the oppression of Palestinians, not individuals," adding that "open enquiry, free exchange of

ideas, and intellectual freedom are crucial to every academic community".

Students at Sussex University also overwhelmingly backed a motion supporting BDS policies in a referendum at the end of March. Sussex Student Union had adopted BDS in 2009, but the policy was due to expire.

Intellectual freedom faced a setback at the University of Southampton after management there withdrew permission for a planned conference on "International Law and the State of Israel" following pressure from the pro-Israel lobby.

Many academics have spoken out against Southampton's decision, which is currently being challenged by a judicial review at the High Court.

The importance of solidarity

The devastation wrought last year makes speaking out in solidarity with Palestine more important than ever.

In 2014, Israel killed more Palestinian civilians than at any other time since 1967, according to figures from the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA).

In total, Israel was responsible for the deaths of 2,314 Palestinians, the majority of whom were killed during its attack on Gaza last summer which saw 1,492 Palestinian civilians killed, over a third of which (551) were children.

During the war, around half a million Palestinians were internally displaced, as Israel bombed homes, refugee camps, schools and hospitals.



Protest condemns Yemen bombing

Anne Alexander

Anti-war campaigners and Yemeni activists in London joined forces in a protest against the Saudi-led bombing on 11 April.

A demonstration organised by Stop the War Coalition outside the Saudi embassy called for an immediate end to the military campaign against the Houthi movement.

A war against our people

Yemeni activist Ilham Kibsi spoke during the protest about the impact of the war on women and children.

"I came to take part in the protest in the name of the children and women of Yemen, to demand an end to this war against our people", she told Middle East Solidarity.

"This war is destroying people, it is destroying the environment, everything.

"I have a message for the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia: we don't want the 'legitimacy' brought by your war.

"We know how to organise our own affairs, we will get through the political crisis ourselves."

Meanwhile, local people in the port city of Aden have been fighting off advances by the Houthi movement, which is supporting Ali Abdallah Saleh, Yemen's former president who was ousted after the 2011 popular uprising.



The Gulf's tyrants & their British backers

John Horne and Anne Alexander analyse the role of British arms, British politicians and British corporations in the region-wide counter-revolution led by the Gulf monarchies.

In the early morning of 14 March 2011, thousands of Saudi and Emirati troops rolled across the causeway separating Saudi Arabia's Eastern province from Bahrain, answering a call from Bahrain's King Hamad for assistance in crushing weeks of massive protests demanding democracy.

Four years later, and the Saudi armed forces are once again in action against a neighbour: this time bombarding Yemen from the air in a bid to stop the rise of the Houthi movement which Saudi leaders say is the puppet of their regional rival Iran.

Despite obvious continuities between the two invasions, Saudi Arabia's 2015 war on Yemen takes place in a region which looks very different from the picture in 2011.

Saudi troops entered Bahrain in a desperate bid to stem the tide of popular revolution which had brought down dictators in Tunisia and Egypt, and now lapped the shores of the Gulf.

Hosni Mubarak, a long-time ally of both the Saudis and the US, had fallen from power. A storm of protest was about to break in Syria, as activists sought to bring down Bashar al-Assad's dictatorship.

Intertwined demands for social justice and democratic rights were



spreading like wildfire, challenging the entrenched privileges of decades-old authoritarian regimes.

The crushing of the Bahraini protests marked the first step in the long road towards a successful counter-revolution, led by Saudi Arabia and its allies in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC).

Their motivation was not, however, simply to maintain their autocratic rule and fend off demands for democratic reform.

The revolutionary upsurge of 2011 also threatened to halt the reshaping of the region's economy through neoliberal 'reforms' championed by the global financial institutions, Western governments, of which the Gulf states were the primary beneficiaries.

The counter-revolution's economic goals were to make the Middle East safe again for the privatisers, the arms merchants, the international loan sharks of the IMF and the multinationals.

Although the men driving forward this process haunt the corridors of power in Riyadh, Dubai and Cairo, they rely on the backing of the same Western governments which so loudly, if belatedly, proclaimed their admiration for the unarmed protesters who toppled tyrants in 2011.

The main villain of the piece is of course the USA. The partnership between US oil companies and the Al Saud family played a key role in Saudi Arabia's development in the mid-20th century, and those connections continue to shape the ongoing alliance between the Gulf monarchs and the US.

On the global stage, Britain has long been a second-rate imperial power when compared to the US.

Yet in the Gulf, the long history of British colonialism and the Coalition government's aggressive promotion of connections with the area's despots since 2010 have given Britain a special role in the counter-revolution.

The mass uprising in Bahrain, coupled with smaller protest movements in Kuwait, Saudi Arabia and Oman, threatened to jeopardise British plans for deeper economic and military ties with the Gulf; a strategy which Ministers are now openly describing as the re-establishment of “a permanent presence East of Suez.”

After the Coalition government came to power in May 2010, the Foreign Office was tasked with the “relaunch of UK engagement with the Gulf states”.

Working with the newly established National Security Council, this so-called Gulf Initiative sought to “strengthen regional security and to improve commercial, economic, cultural and educational ties” in order to “enhance UK ‘soft power’” in the region.

Gulf monarchs and their governments were quickly courted. King Hamad of Bahrain, for example, was one of the first foreign leaders to visit David Cameron in Downing Street in July 2010, the same month that the first Gulf Initiative ministerial meeting was held.

By 2013, Cameron was boasting that “over 100 high-level visits – to every country and on every issue” had taken place.

The commercial thrust of this initiative emerges plainly in government speeches.

Addressing Omani businessmen in October 2010, Foreign Minister Alastair Burt observed that the “Gulf currently accounts for around 50 percent of UK Defence exports” and celebrated recent deals done in Oman by BP, HSBC and Carillion.

This wasn’t enough. Burt stated that the government wants “the UK to be... the wider Gulf’s commercial ‘partner of choice’”, able to “win ... a large share of the estimated \$2.2 trillion” in Gulf infrastructure projects and also to seize opportunities in healthcare, education, training and tourism”.

He was also quick to point out the potential of “free trade zones to attract investment”, hinting towards the neoliberal adjustments

Britain is keen to see implemented to leverage further influence through Western commercial and capital flow.



The tone of Burt’s speech was echoed a week later when the Qatari Emir visited Cameron and the two announced a “a new and dynamic partnership for the future”, which reflected increased British dependence on Qatari gas and inward investment in British real estate and companies like Barclays.

The Gulf Initiative has been carried out largely away from public scrutiny or awareness.

Missing from the scattered documents and speeches of this neo-colonial exercise is any recognition that the suppression of basic democratic and social rights is integral to the authoritarian regimes of the region.

In this sense, the Arab uprisings that swept the region in early 2011, bringing visibility to everyday repression, threatened to scupper British plans towards the Gulf, particularly as the Bahrain regime, supported with troops from Saudi Arabia and the UAE, adopted increasingly brutal tactics to crush the pro-democracy movement.

The Arab uprisings... threatened to scupper British plans

After Ben Ali’s regime collapsed in Tunisia and days before the fall of Mubarak’s regime in Egypt, Britain moved quickly to offer political legitimacy to the Gulf states.

On 2 February 2011, the UK-UAE taskforce met in London and agreed on further plans to “drive bilateral trade and investment”.

Foreign Secretary William Hague then travelled to Bahrain and the UAE on 10 February in what the BBC described as a push for “trade and reform”. Days later, Bahrain would erupt in mass protest.

Four years later, with dozens dead, hundreds tortured and thousands imprisoned, this imperative remains the same.

The British Embassy currently describes its mission as helping “Bahrain to return to a stable and reformist state... while protecting our significant defence and security interests”.

While the Gulf states arrested and tortured political leaders, journalists,

unionists and human rights defenders, the British government turned a wilful blind eye and sought to carry on business as usual.

Trade between the UK and the Gulf increased by 39 percent in 2011-12 to £29.8bn.

The UK also had no qualms about strengthening the Gulf’s capacity to repress. A UK government brochure from 2014 notes that “all Gulf states are building security capabilities and have significant resources to do so” which offers “opportunities” for British firms.

One company, Gamma Group, which manufactures software that has been used to spy on Bahraini activists, sponsored the 2015 Security & Policing Event run by the Home Office, which Gulf states regularly attend.

Arms sales are central to British interests in the Gulf. The Department of Trade and Investment (UKTI) describes the Gulf states as “priority markets” for defence and security.

Although Bahrain was dropped from this status in 2011, that too has been restored, particularly with the promise of a £1bn sale of Typhoon warplanes to the country.

According to government figures, between January 2011 and September 2014, the UK approved more arms exports to UAE and Saudi Arabia than any other country, with exports to the Gulf states totalling over £10.5bn.

This defence relationship is further buttressed by British support for arms fairs in the Gulf, such as IDEX in UAE, Milpol in Qatar and the Bahrain International Airshow.

Similarly, representatives of Gulf regime’s are routinely invited to arms fairs in the UK, like DSEi, Security & Policing and the Farnborough International Airshow.

Defence sales, however, are just one facet of deepening British commercial interests in the Gulf and the wider Middle East.

Following Cameron’s trip to the region in February 2011, then trade Minister Lord Green established a “Middle East Task Force” which brought business into the heart of British decision making. The group has been largely operating in secret ever since.

In 2013, Business Minister Michael Fallon refused to release the minutes of the meetings to an MP, claiming it “would not be in the public interest”, despite the fact that some had been

published the previous year following a Freedom of Information request.

The first meeting in July 2011 brought together assorted CEOs and Chairpersons, from Mothercare to Shell and HSBC to BAE Systems.

Green noted that the aim was “to ensure that strategic business considerations were fully factored into Her Majesty’s Government’s policies” in what was called a “vital region for the UK’s political and economic security”. Gulf states Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Kuwait and UAE were singled out as “key markets for the group to focus on”.

The minutes make clear British government interest across all commercial, security and cultural sectors and their prioritisation of business interests over democratic freedoms.

British politicians and corporations have also played a critical role in the success of the Gulf rulers’ strategy for counter-revolution in the wider Middle East, backing the restoration of the old regime in Egypt in an even more vicious form under Abdelfattah al-Sisi’s leadership.

The Egyptian Economic Development Conference (EEDC) which drew nearly 2,000 delegates to the seaside resort of Sharm al-Sheikh on 13-15 March 2015 provided al-Sisi’s regime with a chance to show off its “reforming” credentials to international investors and global politicians.

The “reforms” in question are of course, all economic. The corporate and government heads attending the conference were unlikely to have asked any awkward questions about other “reforms” which al-Sisi’s military regime has ushered in since seizing power in 2013, such as the notorious anti-protest laws and this year’s new “anti-terror” law which turns every peaceful gathering on the steps of a government building or in a public square into a potential “act of terrorism”.

The organisers were clearly taking no chances, however. According to the Guardian’s report, the conference wifi blocked access to Human Rights Watch’s website.

The conference was a joint initiative between Saudi Arabia and Egypt. Since



the military overthrew the Muslim Brotherhood affiliated president, Mohamed Morsi in July 2013, Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Kuwait have bankrolled the new regime, releasing billions of dollars in loans, fuel shipments and grants to keep the economy afloat.

Sisi can count on the same constellation of British backers who have been working with his patrons. The list includes the Coalition government, which has bent over backwards to promote trade links with Egypt; Martin Sorrell, the British head of the world’s biggest advertising firm, and the dictators’ favourite ‘strategic consultants’, Tony Blair and Peter Mandelson.

In recent months, the Coalition government has redoubled its efforts to promote UK investments in Egypt. The level of UK investment in Egypt reached over \$5 billion in 2013/4, a nearly 30 percent increase compared to the previous year.

The British Embassy’s website gushes with praise for Sisi’s economic reforms, and highlights the prospects for Egypt’s “democratic transition”.

Foreign Secretary Philip Hammond led a large British delegation to the EEDC, including representatives of oil giant BP, gas producer BG group, Vodafone and WHSmith.

The chief executive of WPP, the world’s largest advertising company, is clearly happy to count Sisi’s regime among his clients.

WPP affiliated companies provided the event management for the EEDC, organised media accreditation and are working hard to “reposition” Sisi’s branding for a global audience.

Blair was at pains to point out last year that his “advice” to Sisi was given for free. So maybe his appearance at the

EEDC was also strictly pro bono.

He was gushing in his praise for Sisi, telling delegates at the conference: “I think for the first time ... in my memory you have a leadership in Egypt that understands the modern world, is prepared to take the measures that are relevant to the modern world, and wants Egypt connected to the modern world in the right way.”

If recent revelations of his attempts to set up a £30m contract to advise the UAE government are correct, such support may come with a heavy price tag. He has also reportedly pocketed £27m for his work with the Kuwaiti government.

Mandelson has also embarked on a career as a ‘strategic consultant’, perhaps with the hope of emulating Blair’s huge earnings.

The Labour peer’s Global Counsel business is a WPP affiliate and its offices are listed on the EEDC conference promoters’ website as their London address.

He also chairs the board of Lazard, the financial consultancy which is advising Sisi on his economic policy.

British arms, British politicians and British corporations thus play a key role in the region-wide process of counter-revolution which has rolled back the democratic freedoms seized by the popular uprisings of 2011.

British-made Typhoon fighter jets scream through Yemen’s skies, flown by British-trained Saudi pilots, dropping British-made bombs on the poorest country in the region.

We need to build a movement which shows that solidarity can be “made in Britain”, too.



A Royal Saudi Air Force Typhoon fighter | Photo: Ra.Az @ Flickr



Conference discusses Arab Revolutions MENA Solidarity

Around 140 people took part in lively discussions at a conference co-organised by MENA Solidarity, Egypt Solidarity and Bahrain Watch on 13-14 February.

Speakers from Morocco, Bahrain, Egypt and Syria discussed topics as diverse as sectarianism and counter-revolution, workers' struggles and the battle for social justice, and prospects for Palestinian liberation.

Human rights

Maryam al-Khawaja, a Bahraini activist and Co-Director of the Gulf Center for Human Rights and Syrian revolutionary activist Joseph Daher opened the conference after a special screening of documentary film *We Are The Giant* which traces the stories of Bahraini, Libyan and Syrian activists.

Professor Gilbert Achcar and Sameh Naguib, a leading member of the Revolutionary Socialists in Egypt, joined Maryam to discuss whether the counter-revolutions have succeeded.

Palestinian journalists Riya Hasan and Toufic Haddad analysed prospects for Palestinian liberation, while Nadine Marroushi explored Egyptian mobilisations against sexual harassment.

Egyptian human rights activist Sherif Azer and Moroccan researcher Miriyam Aouragh discussed prospects for democratic change.

Mohamed Boutayeb, a civil service trade union activist reported on the struggle for union rights and social justice in Morocco.

Activist strategies

Sai Englert spoke on behalf of the campaign for Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions at SOAS, joining John Horne of Bahrain Watch and Sarah Waldron of Campaign Against Arms Trade in a panel discussing activist strategies.

Bahraini activist Ala'a Shehabi, Abdi Suleiman from the NUS Black Students Campaign, columnist and author Owen Jones and Anne Alexander from MENA Solidarity Network ended the conference with a session on Building Solidarity, Challenging Power.

Audio and video available online at www.menasolidaritynetwork.com

'Empty plates' protests back hunger strikers Egypt Solidarity

A wave of co-ordinated hunger strikes by political prisoners in Egypt sparked the 1,000 Hours of Hunger campaign, organised by Egypt Solidarity.

Over the following two months 44 people in six countries took part in a relay of 24-hour hunger strikes, clocking up over 1,000 hours of hunger in total.

Hunger strikers in Egypt included Mohamed Soltan, who began refusing food in January 2014, and Alaa Abdelfattah, a well-known activist who has been imprisoned by every Egyptian regime over the last decade.

Alaa began his hunger strike on 18



Students at SOAS mobilise in solidarity with political prisoners | Photo: Egypt Solidarity

August after prison authorities stalled visits to his critically-ill father, only allowing him to reach the hospital after he had already fallen into a coma.

Alaa's younger sister Sanaa, also detained and later sentenced to three years in jail for taking part in a protest calling for her brother's release, also joined the hunger strike.

The movement quickly swelled with hundreds of political prisoners taking part at its peak, including revolutionary activists Ahmed Maher and Ahmed

Confiscation of assets slammed Egypt Solidarity

Film-maker Ken Loach, Irish civil rights activist and journalist Eamonn McCann, trade unionists and academics from Oxford, Cambridge, London and other UK universities signed a statement condemning the January 2015 decision by Egypt's prosecutor general to freeze the assets of 112 individuals, claiming that they are members or supporters of the outlawed Muslim Brotherhood.

Among those targeted are leading members of left and liberal groups.

"The real political purpose of the seizure of assets is revealed by the inclusion on the list of Haitham Mohamedain and Hisham Fouad of the Revolutionary Socialists, Amr Ali of the 6th April Youth Movement and Khaled el-Sayyed from the Youth for Justice and Freedom Movement," the statement noted.

"They are activists who have fought tirelessly to defend ordinary Egyptians from repression by the state, including the thousands of political prisoners who experience torture and abuse in detention centres."

Douma and sisters Hind and Rasha Mounir who were arrested 16 August 2013 after taking part in a protest condemning the massacre of at least 1,000 people by the Egyptian military and police at Raba'a al-Adawiyya Square and sentenced to 25 years in jail.

The call for 1,000 Hours of Hunger was launched at SOAS in London in response to an appeal by the Freedom for the Brave prisoners' rights campaign in Egypt.

Alice Finden, a postgraduate student studying Gender and Law at SOAS said: "I am taking part in the hunger strike in solidarity with brave Egyptian activists who are in jail because of their protest against the oppressive laws in place in Egypt. Only through solidarity and unity can we spread the word about the restriction on freedoms in Egypt."

Students from 11 universities helped to build the campaign with leafleting sessions, 'empty plates' protests and speaking at meetings and events.

London Sphinx gagged



Activists from Egypt Solidarity protested at Cleopatra's Needle on 22 November, gagging the Sphinx in protest at the crackdown on dissent in Egypt.

Journalists resist censors Egypt Solidarity

The sentences handed down by an Egyptian court to Al-Jazeera journalists Peter Greste, Baher Mohamed and Mohamed Fahmy in June 2014 sparked outrage worldwide, with journalists across the globe taping shut their mouths in silent condemnation of the verdicts.

The three AJ staff members were given 7-10 year jail sentences for allegedly aiding the Muslim Brotherhood and "reporting false news".

After months of campaigning Peter Greste was freed and deported from Egypt in February 2015.

His co-defendants Baher Mohamed and Mohamed Fahmy were released on bail and were awaiting a retrial as Middle East Solidarity went to press.

Many other journalists remain behind bars, however. Photojournalist Shawkan (Mohamed Abou Zeid) has spent over 600 days in Tora prison after being arrested covering the



Protesters held placards of political prisoners Sanaa Seif, Alaa Abdelfattah, Mohamed Soltan, Yara Sallam and others | All photos: Egypt Solidarity



massacre of Muslim Brotherhood protesters at Raba'a al-Adawiyya Square on 14 August 2013.

In handwritten notes smuggled out of his cell, he has described the terrible conditions in the jail. "I am left here to rot without any logic," he said in a letter published online on 7 April.

Prosecutors often apply to renew detention repeatedly, while relatives and lawyers often struggle to locate detainees in the labyrinthine network of prisons and detention facilities.

Outside the prison walls pressure is increasing on journalists to toe the regime's line.

Uncritical support

In October 2014 leading newspaper editors signed a declaration pledging uncritical support for the Egyptian government, and pledging to refuse to publish any criticism of the police, army or judiciary.

Hundreds of journalists reacted angrily, signing a public counter statement rejecting editorial pressure to self-censor.

Leading international journalists, including Channel 4's Jon Snow, the Guardian's correspondent in Cairo,

Patrick Kingsley and Professor of Journalism at City University, Roy Greenslade signed an open letter in solidarity with their colleagues in Egypt, which was initiated by Egypt Solidarity and published in the Guardian on 10th November.

"At a time when a draconian anti-protest law has condemned thousands of young political activists to prison, when NGOs are facing a web of oppressive legislation restricting their activities, and when the scope of military trials against civilians is expanding, the role of journalists in holding those in power to account is more vital than ever," the statement said.

Egypt Solidarity has helped to build solidarity with detained journalists in Egypt over the past year.

We worked with colleagues at Al-Jazeera to build a protest at the Egyptian embassy on 26 December, and highlighted Shawkan's case on our website and social media channels.

The open letter in solidarity with Egyptian journalists taking a stand against censorship which we initiated was signed by dozens of leading international journalists.



South Korean protest against tear gas shipment | Photo: Yeo Ok

Campaign case study: #StoptheShipment Bahrain Watch

Bahrain Watch's 2013 campaign #Stoptheshipment demonstrates how coordinated action can help block repressive regimes from rearming.

Bahrain Watch received a leaked document in October 2013 from a source close to Bahrain's Ministry of Interior which showed the government's intention to buy 1.6m tear gas canisters.

Since 2011, at least 39 deaths in Bahrain have been linked to misuse of tear gas, according to data compiled by Physicians for Human Rights (PHR).

The deaths include 14 year old Ali Jawad al-Shaikh who was shot in the back of his neck with a tear gas canister, and 15 year old Sayed Hashim Saeed, also shot in his neck with a tear gas canister at close range.

No police officer or other government official in Bahrain has been held accountable for these or any other abuses due to the systematic misuse of tear gas.

#StoptheShipment zeroed in on South Korea after their Defence Acquisition Program Administration (DAPA) confirmed that it was considering a request to export tear gas to Bahrain from an unnamed Korean company, suspected to be DaeKwang Chemical Corporation.

The Financial Times reported DaeKwang's CEO saying that as part of the deal, which was worth USD \$28 million, the Bahraini government was planning to buy 3 million tear gas

canisters – around 4 canisters for each Bahraini citizen.

The #StopTheShipment campaign gained widespread support in Bahrain and around the world, which involved protests on the ground both in London and Seoul.

Korean activists staged a 'die-in' outside DAPA offices during a protest backed by trade unions, peace organisations and human rights groups. The Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU) demanded that the Korean government refuse to grant an export license. The KCTU wrote to DAPA, which oversees the defence industry and the National Police Agency, saying:

"Recently, Bahraini government had indiscriminately fired large amount of tear gas and resulted in hundreds of casualties ... One cannot avoid condemnation, both in humanitarian and international standard sense, by exporting Korean canisters to the country where hundreds are either being killed or injured by them."

Internationally, participants in the campaign placed calls, and sent over 390,000 emails to the Korean government.

The action against Korean tear gas exports culminated in complaints lodged with the OECD, and five UN Special Rapporteurs, by a Bahrain Watch legal team.

Due to the pressure created by the #StoptheShipment campaign, South Korea's DAPA denied two requests to export tear gas to Bahrain citing as reasons the "unstable politics in the country [Bahrain], people's death due to tear gas and complaints from human rights groups".

Investigation exposes land sales Bahrain Watch

A joint Bahrain Watch and Financial Times investigation into the sale and reclamation of sea plots around the island of Bahrain produced a front page article in the Financial Times and an ongoing project at Bahrain Watch.

Opposition activists claim that sea plots of land should be owned by the State, an issue that has been controversial in Bahrain for many years.

In a statement to the Financial Times, Bahrain Watch commented, "These assets belong to the people of Bahrain and need to be returned to the state budget. The island's beautiful coastlines have been privatised and destroyed to pave way for the ruling family's private developments."

In 2002 the King of Bahrain issued a law giving himself the sole authority to grant state land rights. The investigation details how plots of land, or plots at sea yet to be reclaimed, were transferred to a private company called Premier Group, or to a host of its subsidiaries.

Those familiar with the situation say that Premier Group is an investment vehicle for the Bahraini royal family.

Some of these plots "were later exchanged for stakes in multibillion dollar joint ventures with Islamic Banks and other investors to build housing, commercial property and luxury hotels," the Financial Times reported.

The investigation found that the company had shares of an investment value of \$14.5 billion within Bahrain and a luxury portfolio in Britain of at least 21 properties that include the Marriott Park Lane Hotel and Four Seasons Park Lane Hotel, each acquired for around £100m.

Lawmakers in Bahrain have found no evidence to suggest that any of this money was returned to Bahrain's public purse.



Illustration: Christopher Dombres



Bahraini road block | Photo: Sayed Baqer

Road Block @ Shubbak Festival Bahrain Watch

Road Block is an art installation conceived by the Road Bloc Collective, that will be held at the Shubbak Festival at Rich Mix Cultural Foundation in London, 11-26 July. Bahrain Watch is a co-sponsor of the event.

The Road Bloc Collective are a group of artists and activists who explore how power is written into urban space

through architecture and images.

As parts of Bahrain transform into territories of dissent, where roundabouts become 'squares' and spaces for political speech and action, graffiti is visible like never before and road blocks and marches are part of everyday life – we see the scenography and spectacle of revolution.

Featuring photography, sound works and installations, Road Block enacts the ongoing battle for space and claims for 'the right to the city', that provoke and challenge us to reconsider the relationship between space and power.

On Sunday 12th July at 3pm join the curators, researchers and artists on a tour of the exhibition.

Campaigns expose abuse in Qatar MENA Solidarity

The appalling conditions endured by migrant workers in Qatar have sparked a growing number of campaigns to expose the grim reality behind the new sports facilities and university campuses springing up in the Gulf state.

Ahead of the 2022 World Cup, the Trades Union Congress has launched the Playfair Qatar campaign which calls on football fans to put pressure on Qatar over abuse of migrant workers by bosses who confiscate their passports and frequently pay their wages late.

Qatar is also under fire from international trade unions and human rights groups for the notorious 'kafala'

system. Under these laws, foreign workers require a Qatari sponsor before they can work. They must seek their employer's permission to leave the country or change jobs.

Despite announcing reforms to the kafala system last year, in March, Qatari officials admitted in March that there was no timetable for the changes.

UK universities are under fire for failing to protect the rights of workers on their campuses in Qatar. University College London (UCL) is facing pressure from the lecturers' union UCU and student activists to take action against the abuse of workers on its Qatar campus.

UCU activists at Manchester Metropolitan University also launched a campaign last year after the university signed a deal to train Qatari police officers.

Read more on the Playfair Qatar campaign here: playfairqatar.org.uk



Postcards target Sisi's UK backers Egypt Solidarity

A new campaign launched by Egypt Solidarity aims to disrupt the picture perfect image of Sisi's Egypt with a series of postcards highlighting human rights abuses by the military regime.

Each postcard will highlight cases of repression or the stories of political prisoners and will be addressed to a specific corporate executive or politician who wants to do business with Sisi.

Egypt Solidarity activists will be distributing the cards through trade union branches and student unions and asking supporters to complete a statement on the card calling on British officials and corporations to stop backing Sisi's dictatorship.

The first postcard will highlight lethal attacks by security forces on protesters, featuring the cases of Sondos Reda and Shaimaa el-Sabbagh, two women killed in the streets during demonstrations on the anniversary of the 25 January uprising this year.

Sondos, a 17-year old activist from Alexandria was killed on 23 January.

Shaimaa was shot in the back as she walked through Tahrir Square to lay a wreath of flowers on 24 January.



Sondos



Shaimaa

To order copies of the cards for your union branch or donate towards the costs of the campaign, go to www.egyptsolidarityinitiative.org/postcards

They need your support



Abdulhadi al-Khawaja
(Bahrain)

Sentenced to life imprisonment in June 2011, Abdulhadi al-Khawaja is a long-standing advocate of peaceful resistance to the Bahraini regime. He has been tortured in jail and announced a hunger strike on 19 March.



Hussain Jawad
(Bahrain)

Activist Hussain Jawad was arrested from his home by masked officers in February 2015. He was abused in detention and faces a lengthy sentence. His father Mohammed, a fellow human rights activist, is also a prisoner of conscience.



Yara Sallam (Egypt)

Arrested on 21 June 2014 as a peaceful protest against repression was broken up by thugs and police, Yara is serving a two-year jail sentence. She is a human rights activist and works for the Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights.



Nabeel Rajab (Bahrain)

Outspoken human rights activist Nabeel Rajab is currently in solitary confinement on charges relating to comments he made on Twitter criticising Bahraini support for the Saudi attack on Yemen.



Sanaa Seif (Egypt)

Student Sanaa Seif was also arrested on 21 June 2014 during the same demonstration and is serving a two-year sentence.

She was campaigning for the release of political prisoners, including her brother Alaa Abdelfattah.



Mohamed Soltan (Egypt)

After an unfair trial and 18 months in detention, Mohamed was sentenced to 25 years in jail in April 2015. He spent most of the last year on hunger strike and has been systematically abused in prison.



Zainab al-Khawaja
(Bahrain)

During her trial in October 2014 Zainab al-Khawaja ripped up a picture of King Hamad. For this act, she was sentenced to 3 years. Her father, Abdulhadi is serving a life sentence while her sister Maryam was also sentenced in absentia to a year in jail.



Alaa Abdelfattah (Egypt)

Jailed under Mubarak, Morsi and Sisi, Alaa has been a consistent defender of human rights and free speech.

He was sentenced to five years in prison in March 2015 for taking part in an unauthorised protest.



Shawkan (Egypt)

Photojournalist Shawkan (Mahmoud Abou Zaid) has been detained without trial since August 2013, when he was arrested during the massacre of protesters at Raba'a al-Adawiyya. He isn't an activist, but was simply targeted for doing his job.

WHAT YOU CAN DO

Make a protest

Write a letter to the Bahraini or Egyptian ambassador in London, calling for the release of all those unjustly detained.

Make it specific: it is important that the regimes know that individual prisoners have not been forgotten.

Look out for information online about dates for trials and appeal hearings to time your action.

Make it public

Don't just let the ambassador know you're angry, tell the world.

Write to the media, spread the word on social media, or ask your student union or trade union to circulate your letter.

Embassy officials read and respond to letters in the national press. They care about their image abroad

Do it together

Collective action is stronger than a lone voice.

Why not organise a joint letter and collect signatures from workmates or other students?

Put a resolution to your union branch or student union to send an official protest.

Organise or join a protest to highlight specific cases of repression. Go to www.menasolidaritynetwork.com/campaignguide for model motions, embassy addresses and more.



Disabled activists join a protest in Tunisia in 2011 | Photo: Nasser Nouri

Liked what you just read?

Order more copies online

To order extra copies for your trade union branch or student union go to www.menasolidaritynetwork.com/orderform

Want to write for us? Get in touch.

Contact us online if you have an idea for a story, want to contribute a translation or to share a photograph or illustration you have created. Go to www.menasolidaritynetwork.com/MEScontributors



MENA Solidarity

[menasolidaritynetwork.com](http://www.menasolidaritynetwork.com)

MENA Solidarity is a network of activists from different unions in the UK engaged in building solidarity for struggle to win social justice and workers' rights in the Middle East. We are supported by the UCU, PCS and NUT unions and a number of other trade union regions and branches.

BAHRAIN WATCH

Bahrain Watch

bahrainwatch.org

Bahrain Watch is an independent research and advocacy organisation formed in February 2012 that seeks to promote effective, transparent and accountable governance in Bahrain.



Egypt Solidarity

egyptsolidarityinitiative.org

Egypt Solidarity launched on 11 February 2014, the third anniversary of the fall of Mubarak, in order to campaign in defence of democratic rights in Egypt.



Yemen: an ugly war for the Gulf's money

As Arab coalition forces gathered under Saudi Arabia's leadership to join air strikes against the Houthi movement in Yemen, most of the Egyptian media was swept up in a wave of enthusiasm for military intervention.

For our first guest column, we publish an edited version of an article by **Dina Omar**, one of the few Egyptian journalists who dared to speak out against the clamour for war.

Once again, the Egyptian air force is moving through Arab skies, accompanied by cheers from the Egyptian media and "heroic" official statements. Meanwhile, not a word is said about the civilian victims in Yemen of the air strikes.

It is no great surprise that Egypt declared war on Yemen only ten days after the Gulf states announced promises that billions will flow into illusory economic projects here.

There has been a major influx of Gulf funding since the 2013 military coup, half of which has gone into the army's coffers. It is the price of this military adventure, which transforms young soldiers into mercenaries, sold to the highest bidder in an irresponsible waste of Egyptians' blood.

As a direct result of the military operation, the Houthi movement now threatens any Egyptian soldier who fights on Yemeni soil, in contrast to its reassurances in meetings last month that the Straits would remain open.

Sisi's regime, which creates new construction projects ignoring the needs of middle-class and low-income people and only serving the interests of the wealthy, is building up its propaganda by the export of military heroism in order to cover up the social and political demands at home.

The General did not reveal to us the fact that the budget deficit has risen by 30 percent during the last seven months of his rule. Yet during the same period his most important priority has been the purchase of new fighter aircraft from France.

The Gulf states' initiative, led by Saudi Arabia, essentially aims at circumventing the Yemeni revolution. The goal is to quieten the southern front in order to be able to engage full-time in the battles on the North and East against the Syrian and Bahraini peoples in order to eliminate their revolutions.

Meanwhile Iranian intervention basically aims to open a Yemeni front as an arena for international conflict. The idea is to create a bargaining chip with which to impose Iran's conditions on escaping from sanctions and win concessions in negotiations which serve the interests of the mullahs at the expense of the Yemeni people's demands for bread and social justice.

The countries of the Arab coalition consider themselves as "saviours of the people from ISIS", but as their attacks escalated, ISIS leader Abu-Bakr al-Baghdadi issued a statement in favour of the air strikes on sectarian grounds.

He might as well have been following the instructions of the Saudi Ministry of Religious Endowments which ordered a unified text for Friday sermons about the need to stem the "Shi'a tide".

The Arab regimes are exploiting sectarianism in this war which only serves the interests of the pillars of counter-revolution in the region.

So Saudi Arabia, which is fighting the Shi'a Houthis in Yemen, is the same state which is coordinating with the US-sponsored Iraqi government in order to hit the Sunni group ISIS in Iraq and Syria. It is contradictions such as these which reveal the falsity and deception of the sectarian slogans of this war.

We reject the military attacks by the Arab coalition on Yemen, and support the Yemeni people's right to decide their own fate without foreign interference.



First published in Arabic on www.revsoc.me, 29 March 2015. Edited and translated by Anne Alexander