

# Middle East Solidarity

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## VIRAL RESISTANCE?

Looking back on a year of revolts - preparing for pandemic



### Sudan's revolution at the grassroots

Resistance committees continue the struggle for change from below

### Algeria: a year in the streets

Learning the lessons from the Hirak and Beijaia's general strike against the presidential election

### 'We just want them all to go'

Voices from Iraq's popular movement against corruption and sectarianism

### Letter from Raqqa

Khaled, who spent three years in hiding from ISIS sends a letter of solidarity to locked-down London

### Refugees and Lebanon's revolt

Has the uprising left refugees and migrants on the sidelines?

# OUT IN APRIL 2020

## MENA Solidarity Research Report No.1



## ALGERIA: THE PEOPLE DEMAND CHANGE

A Research Report by MENA Solidarity Network

By Hamza Hamouchene, Samir Larabi and Shelagh Smith

**Contents include:** A year of the Hirak - History of the Algerian workers' movement - The struggle in Kabylia - Teachers drive union change - Trade unions and the Hirak - Britain's role in Algeria - Political prisoners and repression - A guide to solidarity action

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# Contents

## Cover story

### 9 Viral Resistance?

Our collection of feature articles this issue look back at a year of popular revolts and forward to the intensifying crisis caused by the coronavirus pandemic.

## Features

### 10 Sudan continues to resist

Revolutionary organisations are stepping into the gap left by the failures of the state.

### 11 Algeria's year in the streets

Shelagh Smith draws up a balance sheet of the popular movement and Kamal Aissat analyses Beijaia's general strike.

### 15 'We just want them all to go' - Iraqi protesters

Irang Bak speaks to Iraqi activists about the wave of mass demonstrations demanding radical political and social change.

### 18 Refugees and the Lebanese revolution

Sophie Chamas discusses the hopes and contradictions at the heart of Lebanon's rebellion.

## First person

### 4 'You can't liberate the land without liberating women'

Manar Raje and Haya Abu Shukhaidem speak out on violence against women in Palestine.

### 22 A letter from Raqqa

Khaled, who survived three years in hiding during the ISIS occupation of Raqqa sends a message of solidarity to locked-down London.

### 23 Gaza's daily struggle for survival

Ibtisam speaks to Dave Clinch about Palestinians' fears over coronavirus after years of Israeli attacks on Gaza's health system.

## News reports

### 5 Coronavirus crisis hits region

### 7 Hospitals in firing line in Syria offensive

### 8 Secret police benefit from Egypt-Israel gas deals

## Campaign reports

### 24 Egyptian student's arrests sparks solidarity campaign in Italy and UK

## Campaign guide

### 26 Prisoners under threat from coronavirus

## Back page

### 28 Saudi state spreads the virus of sectarian hate

The Shi'a community is being scapegoated by the regime writes Ameen Nemer.

## About us

Events in the Middle East often dominate the news, but it is 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 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, NEU - NUT section and a number of Trades Union Councils and local trade union branches.

Find out more here:

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# ‘You can’t liberate the land without liberating women’

Palestinian activists **Manar Raje** and **Haya Abu Shukhaidem** speak to **Oisin Challen Flyn** about the growing movement over violence against women in Palestine.

Across Palestine a new slogan resonated last September: “You can’t liberate the land and not women.” Activists gathered in cities across Palestine to protest violence against women. The protests were called after the murder of Israa al-Ghrayeb by family members in a so-called “honour killing”, and against the Palestinian Authority’s handling of the case, which looked at the time as if the killers would escape sentencing.

As a result of the Israeli occupation of the West Bank that began in 1967, the Palestinian legal system remains fragmented and outdated, with laws dating back to Jordanian and Ottoman rule of Palestine creating loopholes such as the ones Israa’s killers attempted to use to escape justice.

The political situation in Palestine means that it is very difficult to organise any form of resistance to women’s oppression. The Israeli Occupation brutally crushes political expression. Unlike Israeli citizens, who are subject to civil law, Palestinians living in the West Bank are ruled under military law, meaning harsh sentences and repressive measures for activity deemed “terrorism”, including protesting.

Activists are regularly arrested, tortured and held in administrative detention without trial, even targeted for social media posts critical of the Israeli government or their prop, the Palestinian Authority. In recent years, Israeli attempts to impose control on the region have intensified, with increased evictions of Palestinian homes to clear space for Israeli settlers. Donald Trump’s symbolic moving of the American embassy to Jerusalem has only emboldened these efforts.

In this environment of fear, there is very little space to organise against violence against women. We spoke to Manar Raje and Haya Abu Shukhaidem who were involved in the movement following Israa’s death which attempted to challenge this fear.

## How did the protests start?

*Manar Raje:* A few months ago a girl from Beit Sahour “mysteriously” died. According to some Facebook pages, Israa al-Ghrayeb, a 22-year-old woman who was working as a makeup artist and DJ passed away from an aneurysm caused by domestic violence. According to what was reported by her unknown friend, she was hit by her brothers and her sister’s husband who broke her spinal cord.

I believe that no one has the right to discriminate against anyone and no one has the right to take someone’s life or freedom for any religious or political reason. As a person who has suffered mentally from hearing similar stories, I had to make the first move by organizing a protest in Bethlehem. Over 70 people assembled and demonstrated with posters and written words against domestic violence, especially against women.

After this event, everyone was inspired and encouraged to act and demand justice. My event echoed a louder voice. More people gathered together from all around the world to protest together against violence. A series of protests were launched all around the West Bank and in Occupied Palestine.

## What are the connections between violence against women and the Israeli occupation?

Israeli policies implement discrimination against Palestinians in the lands it has militarily occupied since 1967, but this is part of a larger colonialist programme. Since Israel’s establishment in 1948, Palestinian citizens who are inside Israel’s pre-1967 borders face policies that limit and contain the Palestinian population in order to create and maintain a Jewish majority country that privileges Jewish citizens over non-Jewish ones.

Although they have the right to vote, they won’t be able to change much as Palestinian citizens of Israel (who comprise about 20 percent of the population) face widespread systematic discrimination in virtually every aspect of life, including loads of laws that give Israeli Jews preferential treatment in dealing with everything from land ownership and housing, to education, employment, health care, and family reunification.



**Demonstrations in Bethlehem sparked a wider movement**  
Photo: Haya Abu Shukhaidem



If you do not have citizenship, you are not allowed to ask for the rights you need. Obviously the message is clear! Palestine has been harmed just like our dearest Israa.

**Women have played a key role in the recent wave of mass protests around the world. Does this bring you any kind of hope?**

Egypt, Morocco and Iraq and other countries in the Middle East are facing extensive use of force and torture. This includes use of excessive force against protesters, sexual harassment, and many other attacks and offenses, as well as restrictions on freedom of expression and discrimination against religious minorities and lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender groups. Those who stand up for human rights across the world are often acting in difficult and dangerous circumstances.

But this movement, this power, and this fight for justice can't keep growing towards a better society without more people. We must be united against racism, violence, discrimination, occupation and war. We must be ones to bring about a better version of this world.

**Who organised the demonstrations for Israa?**

*Haya Abu Shukhaidem:* The protest on 31 August 2019 in Bethlehem was not organised by an official party. It was an initiative from us, young Palestinians, because we believed that we shouldn't remain silent and thus we demanded justice for Israa.

Later protests were organised by a new Palestinian movement called Talaat. Their main message is that there can't be liberated Palestine without liberated Palestinian women.

They have been defending all Palestinian women; prisoners in Israeli jails, the oppressed, the ones who were killed in "honour killings." They organised

demonstrations in Palestine, Lebanon and Germany. I participated in the Ramallah demonstration because I believed that every Palestinian man and woman should support their movement and be part of it.

**What do you see as the roots of violence against women in Palestine?**

Occupation tends to create a more violent environment here, where people are pressured and humiliated. However, I don't believe that this is an excuse for men to victimise women because both men and women in Palestine are exposed to the same oppression and humiliation.

The situation in Palestine is also similar to the situation in any other non-occupied Arab country, so I blame the Arab patriarchal culture and the out-dated Ottoman and Jordanian Laws that are still applied in Palestine.

As far as I know, there are no laws in Islam or Christianity that allow "honour killing" or encourage violence against women.

**Are you having an effect and changing people's minds?**

People didn't talk about the killing of women before. It was as if they took it for granted and didn't think it was wrong. I have noticed that now people have started talking about it, and more and more people are protesting against it. Some people only post about it on social networks but still I believe that this is a big step.

*Manar Raje and Haya Abu Shukhaidem are activists living in the West Bank. .*



## CORONAVIRUS

# Wars and repression compound impact of virus crisis

Alice Finden

For a region struggling with ongoing wars, conflicts and sanctions, and the toll of perpetual economic and political instability, the spread of Covid-19 poses a major threat to the Middle East and North Africa.

The virus, which is a particular worry for those with underlying health problems, compounds the difficult living conditions of those trapped within conflict zones and subject to blockades such as Palestine, Yemen and Iran.

The economic stability of the region is also facing uncertainty as oil prices plunge and tourism is abandoned. Travel restrictions have reduced the global demand for oil. According to the IMF, oil prices have fallen by over 50 percent since the beginning of the crisis.

Iran has been hit hardest and fastest out of the region and has one of the largest number of cases in the world. As of 26 March internal travel was banned in the country as the number of cases confirmed was 27,017 with a death toll of 2,077. These figures have been questioned by health experts, according to whom the excavation of new mass graves in the city of Qom suggests a government cover-up of the true number of deaths.

The UN human rights chief Michelle Bachelet called for US sanctions imposed on Iran to be



**Top: Iran's Deputy Health Minister mops his brow during a press conference Bottom: Cleansing streets in Tehran**  
Photo: Wikimedia Commons

‘urgently re-evaluated’ to avoid the collapse of already strained health infrastructures.

The US sanctions on Iran connected to its nuclear program greatly restrict access to essential medicines and equipment such as respirators. More than 50 medics died in Iran in the first five weeks since Covid-19 was detected in the country. As the virus spread quickly, Iran temporarily released 54,000 prisoners and pardoned 10,000.

Rights groups around the world have urged for an intervention in Palestine, as Gaza contracted its first cases on 22 March.

According to the Palestinian Centre for Human Rights, “the healthcare facilities in Gaza are already on the verge of collapse due to the Israeli-imposed closure on the Gaza Strip for the last 13 years, exacerbated by the repercussions of the Palestinian internal division and political bickering.”

While Israel has taken measures to release Israeli prisoners, Palestinians remain in cramped jails without charge or trial.

Yemen is another state whose debilitated infrastructure puts citizens at high risk from the threat of Covid-19. The effects of war over the past five years in Yemen have been termed ‘the world’s worst humanitarian crisis’.

Tactics particularly adopted by the Saudi-led coalition including the destruction of economic infrastructure and the obstruction of aid has led to the internal displacement of Yemenis and a quarter of a million people living in conditions of famine at the end of 2018. The country grappled with the world’s worst cholera epidemic in 2017 which led to 3,500 deaths.

On 21 March, the Houthi health minister Taha al-Mutawakel warned that 93 percent of the country’s medical equipment is out of service. Precautionary measures have been taken in the country including the closure of schools, shops, cafes and restrictions on travel, which is causing major financial loss to individuals.

In Syria, the years-long conflict has broken down

health infrastructures making Syrians ‘acutely vulnerable’ to the global pandemic. The UN Special envoy for Syria called for “a complete, immediate nationwide ceasefire to enable an all-out effort to suppress Covid-19,” when the country noted its first case of the virus on 24 March.

Syria relies heavily on Iranian military and infrastructural aid in Assad’s war against Sunni rebels. With Iran being one of the hardest hit nations by Covid-19, there are fears that the virus will be spread to Damascus through continuing flights from Tehran. Sectarian rifts have only been reinforced by the virus, with Sunni activists attributing it to Shi’a troops and pilgrims.

There are roughly 6 million displaced Syrians who have fled to Turkey, Lebanon and Jordan because of the war. Older conflicts continue to have their toll too: there are an estimated 3 million Afghan refugees in Iran linked to the 40-year conflict.

Asylum seekers waiting at European port cities like Calais also face the compounding effects of the virus. Many face abandonment by states on top of the inability to socially distance, to maintain levels of hygiene, to treat symptoms of the disease and to bury those that have died. On top of this, aid relief NGOs are having to restrict their provisions of support.

Juliette Delapace, from Caritas in northern France said, “Before, it was politically expedient for the state to deny help to this community because they knew NGOs would fill the gap, but now we cannot do this because we need to protect our volunteers and staff and limit the potential spread among people who

are very vulnerable and have poor health.”

In Qatar, pressures on migrant workers to continue constructing stadiums for the 2022 World cup increase as the rest of the country has been outlawed from ‘all forms of gathering’. The ‘business as usual’ model has been pushed by Qatari authorities where construction workers cannot practice social distancing.

At the same time, after a number of workers became infected with Covid-19, the largest labour camp was locked down by police, leaving thousands of workers trapped in overcrowded conditions. The number of infections in Gulf states is growing rapidly, and similarly rely upon migrant workers.

In Egypt, a number of activists including author Ahdaf Soueif staged a protest demanding the release of prisoners from the country’s overcrowded jails. Mona Seif, also involved, said: “We are in front of the cabinet, asking for the state to take serious steps regarding corona in prisons. As we know, at any time Egypt’s prisons are clusters for disease.”

The demonstrators were arrested and face possible charges of unlawful protest and illegal assembly. Al-Sisi’s government has imposed a nightly curfew throughout the country which has 456 confirmed cases at the time of writing.

Egypt’s desperately underfunded public health system struggles to provide even basic care at the best of times and will face severe stress as the virus spreads. Meanwhile as in other countries, lockdown measures are leading to huge job losses among daily paid workers.

[Read more on solidarity actions related to Covid-19 on page 26.](#)



Medical staff at Aqeirbat hospital demonstrate  
Photo: Al-Atareb news via Facebook

SYRIA

## Hospitals in firing line of regime offensive Middle East Solidarity

Medical staff at Aqeirbat hospital in the countryside near Idlib in Syria staged a desperate protest on 6 February in a bid to draw attention to the destruction of health care facilities and hospitals. They carried banners inviting António Guterres, the UN Secretary General to visit Idlib and “see for himself” a rapidly growing list of medical facilities destroyed or badly damaged by the Assad regime and allies.

The systematic destruction of the health system in Idlib is part of a wider offensive by the Assad regime and its allies, Russia and Iran, to take back military control over the area around Idlib, the last remaining pocket of opposition-held territory. Over half a million people have fled the area in the last

two months.

Motaz, a former programme manager at a Syrian medical NGO, told Middle East Solidarity that UN agencies including the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA) have become “partners in Assad and Russia’s killing machine in Syria,” by providing information about the location of medical facilities directly to Russian forces under a so-called “deconfliction mechanism.”

Although the aim of the scheme was ostensibly to help combatants avoid attacking hospitals, Motaz told us that the information-sharing exercise has in fact increased the threat to medical facilities.

“Syrian NGOs working from the city of Gaziantep in Turkey and attending the various humanitarian cluster meetings believed OCHA’s claims of ‘protecting’ humanitarians and their facilities.

Medical NGOs, for example, shared not only the geographical coordinates but also ‘medical maps’ for their facilities”, he explained.

“Although sharing coordinates with OCHA was “voluntary”, NGOs felt pressurised to share them

with the OCHA.” Some were afraid that failure to sign up would lead to funding cuts, while others believed that providing this information would protect their staff members, patients and facilities.

Yet the “deconfliction mechanism” did not work. The *New York Times* found dozens of examples of hospitals and clinics which appeared on the UN’s no-strike list being damaged or destroyed by Russian or Syrian attacks since April last year.

For Motaz, the UN must bear responsibility for providing this information to allies of a regime determined to wipe out all opposition, including health services not under its own control.

“With OCHA sharing the geographical coordinates with the Russian Federation, the mission of neutralizing these viable facilities becomes easier, less time consuming and less costly. UN agencies, whether directly or indirectly, have become a partner of the Assad regime and Russia in increasing the suffering of the Syrian people.”

[Read a longer version of this article online at www.menasolidaritynetwork.com](http://www.menasolidaritynetwork.com)



## EGYPT

# Shady gas deal deepens Egypt-Israeli ties Middle East Solidarity

On 15 January 2020, Israel and Egypt announced that Egypt was beginning importing natural gas from Israel. According to Reuters, the agreement entails Israel exporting to Egypt 85.3 billion cubic meters of gas over 15 years from the Leviathan and Tamar fields in the east of the Mediterranean.

The backstory to this deal is complicated. From the Egyptian side, the deal is supposed to appear as private sector investment with the firm East Gas as the Egyptian private sector partner.

However, the deal has a major shadowy government player, the Egyptian General Intelligence Service (GIS) which indirectly owns East Gas. Online newspaper Mada Masr, which is well-known for its investigations, uncovered the complex network of the offshore companies owned by GIS aiming at making the greatest profits from importing and transporting the Israeli gas.

According to the Mada Masr investigation, the profits from this deal will not end up in Egypt's public budget but, instead, will be reaped by the General Intelligence Service and its high-ranking generals.

Through this network of shell corporations in the British Virgin Islands, Luxembourg, Switzerland, and the Netherlands, it will



Drilling rig in the Tamar gas field between Cyprus, Israel and Egypt  
Photo: Hibr via Flickr

be easy to escape taxation and legal responsibility.

The deal has also raised concerns over the treaties concerning maritime borders between Egypt, Cyprus, and Israel in the East Mediterranean. In 2014, Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi signed a treaty with Cyprus regarding the delimitation of their sea boundaries and the Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZ - the sea zone that a coastal country has the right to utilise exclusively).

**The profits from this deal will be reaped by the General Intelligence Service and its high-ranking generals.**

This treaty confirms an older agreement between the two parties signed in 2003. According to the UN Law of the Sea Bulletin No.52, the 2003 agreement sets the delimitation of the exclusive economic zone by the median line of which every point equidistant from the nearest point.

It also states that if either of the two parties is engaged in the delimitation of its

exclusive economic zone with another country, it should notify and consult the other party.

However, in 2010 Cyprus and Israel had an agreement on the delimitation of their EEZ without notifying Egypt. The result of these agreements is that the huge Leviathan gas field is located just 2 km away from Egypt's newly set sea border.

Nael al-Shafei, a lecturer at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and an activist on the issue of Mediterranean gas sources believes that the al-Sisi regime has given up Egypt's rights in the East Mediterranean gas to Cyprus, Greece and Israel.

He published a map that illustrates that Leviathan gas field is closer to Egypt than Israel and the Egyptian officials misled the Egyptians about the true intentions behind these agreements.

Other concerns that arise are related to the lack of transparency of the process of signing these agreements by an autocratic military regime such as Egypt's.

Another vital player in this game is Turkey, which is not content with the delimitation agreements between Egypt and Cyprus

because it grants Cyprus an exclusive economic zone that bonds it directly with Greece.

On the other hand, on 2 January 2020, Israel, Cyprus, and Greece announced a new pipeline project called East Med.

The agreements between Egypt and Cyprus will allow the East Med pipeline, that Israel wishes to build under the Mediterranean to export its gas directly to Europe, and to run directly through Cyprus and Greece.

In this case, the biggest states in the Eastern Mediterranean - Egypt and Turkey - will not profit or have a say in this new project.

In a quick response, Turkey has signed an agreement with Libya on maritime borders which allows the former to drill and keep a close watch on the East Mediterranean Gas projects and its key players.

These rising conflicts will certainly add further tension to the complex Middle East landscape while Europe remains the most important destination for these huge supplies of gas.

Turn to p.25 and p.26 for more on solidarity with Egyptian political prisoners.





On the streets in Algiers, February 2020  
Photo: Zoheir Aberkane

# VIRAL RESISTANCE?

**Looking back on a year of revolts - preparing for pandemic**

Not since the height of the uprisings of 2011 has the Middle East and North Africa seen such a concentrated wave of mass protests shake its corrupt and ageing autocrats. Sudan, Algeria, Lebanon and Iraq have all experienced popular mobilisations on a huge scale during the past year, some of which have reached revolutionary proportions. Our special feature assesses the state of the popular movements in these countries as they tip over into another epoch

of crisis in the face of the Covid-19 pandemic. In Sudan, although fear of spreading the virus has emptied the streets, the revolution's Resistance Committees are continuing to mobilise, **Irang Bak** and **Anne Alexander** report. The experience of the Hirak or popular mass movement in Algeria leaves deep roots in political life. As **Shelagh Smith** and **Kamel Aissat** explain, the grassroots democracy which the Hirak has nurtured will not be easily overcome.

We also hear from Iraqi activists **Sara, Muhannad** and **Rawnaq** about how social, environmental and health crises drove hundreds of thousands into the streets last year to demand radical change to the corrupt political system. **Helen Patuck** discusses similar hopes for change in Lebanon, but also the mass movement's blindspots in relation to solidarity that crosses divides between citizens and refugees with **Sophie Chamas** and **Zeinab al-Hajj**.

# SUDAN: FILLING GAPS WHEN THE STATE FAILS

A year after the revolution forced out dictator El Bashir Sudan's activists are bracing themselves for the pandemic, report **Anne Alexander** and **Irang Bak**.

A year ago Sudan's revolutionary uprising hit the world headlines as thousands of demonstrators set up camp outside the army headquarters in Khartoum demanding the overthrow of dictator Omar El Bashir and the creation of a democratic civilian government.

Images of young women protestors like Ala'a Salah, who was photographed in her white robes leading chants from the top of a car, flashed briefly across social media platforms.

On 11 April El Bashir was bundled out of power by his own generals. If they thought that this would satisfy the movement's desire for real change they were wrong. The Transitional Military Council which took power in El Bashir's place was faced with continuing and growing protests and strikes calling for a full transfer of power to a civilian administration.

While the generals did open negotiations with protest leaders from opposition parties and the Sudanese Professionals Association - a network of independent trade unions representing healthworkers, journalists, lawyers, pharmacists and professional groups - they also worked to try and crush the movement in the streets.

Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo, better known by his nickname 'Hemedti', continued to deploy his Rapid Support Forces militia which made a brutal name for itself carrying out genocidal mass killings and rapes in Darfur.

The RSF, the regular army, secret police and other regime militias attacked the mass protest camp in Khartoum on 3 June, killing hundreds of people in a massacre calculated to halt the revolutionary momentum following a highly effective national general strike on 28 and 29 May.

Hemedti and his allies on the TMC had misjudged matters. The killings radicalised the mood, particularly in the poor and working class areas of the capital where crowds demanded that the SPA's leaders withdraw from negotiations with the TMC about power-sharing.

This anger fed into another wave of strikes and mass protests in June which forced further concessions from the military over the composition of a future government.

Meanwhile pressure from outside forces on both the TMC and the negotiators intensified, with neighbouring states and the African Union attempting to mediate and find a compromise. In July a deal was struck which left the 'Sovereign Council' in the



new transitional administration evenly balanced between military and civilian members.

Millions across Sudan celebrated the conclusion of the agreement paving the way for the formation of a new government led by economist Abdalla Hamdok. The deal however did not resolve the underlying contradiction between the original goals of the revolutionary uprising - for a transfer of power to a democratic civilian authority - and the reality of power-sharing with El Bashir's old generals, including Hemedti who was appointed to the Sovereign Council despite his role in the 3 June massacre.

The new government has taken some steps to root out the old regime, for example by appointing a "Committee to Dismantle the Deep State, Fight Corruption and Recover Funds."

On 14 December Yasir El Ata, head of the committee issued a decision to dissolve media institutions, trade unions, professional associations and the employers' union. A few days later the Central Bank announced the seizure of these institutions' assets.

The government also announced the annulment of the infamous Public Order Law issued in 1996, which Omar al Bashir used to heavily restrict and oppress individuals, especially women's freedom. In addition, the former ruling National Congress Party (NCP) will be disbanded.

Although the SPA welcomed the government's decision the attempt to dissolve the trade unions was met with criticism from some journalists and lawyers. The Sudanese Journalists Union (SJU), whose offices were seized and occupied by the military after the government's announcement, issued a statement saying that the "decision goes against their right to free choice and their right to organise themselves."

The Darfur Bar Association criticised the government measures for not dismantling the former regime in reality, but prolonging their legitimacy by keeping the former regime affiliates on other committees in different names.

The Communist Party of Sudan also attacked the top-down approach of the government, arguing that "the most appropriate solution is to withdraw confidence from the leaders of the unions through the general assemblies and not through these administrative solutions".

The huge economic problems facing Sudan have also sharpened the contradictions between the hopes of ordinary people for radical change and the desire of opposition leaders to settle for limited reforms.

Once again, Hemedti provided a neat illustration of how the inequality in Sudanese society could not just





Sudanese resistance committees are mobilising against coronavirus  
Photo: SPA via Facebook

be solved by selectively dissolving institutions of El Bashir's regime in the narrow sense.

The RSF commander sits at the apex of what is sometimes called a "paramilitary-industrial complex" of companies with interests in gold-mining, hotels and the lucrative trade in selling young men as cannon fodder to the Gulf states as mercenaries and security guards. Hemedti is so wealthy that he boasted that he had bailed out the Central Bank when funds ran short last year.

Ordinary people have faced an escalating social crisis caused by problems in the supply of basic foods, including bread. The plummeting value of the Sudanese pound on international markets has sharply exacerbated the crisis in recent months by forcing up the price of imported food.

Meanwhile public services such as education and health are still suffering from years of neglect and underfunding.

It is in this context that the global crisis caused by the spread of Covid-19 has reached Sudan. Although at the time of writing only a handful of cases had been reported, the country will face a serious challenge in responding

to the virus. While El Bashir's generals profited from private hospitals, the public health system was left in ruins.

There are only 80 ventilators and 40 critical care beds in public hospitals serving a population of 44 million according to sources in the Sudanese health sector.

Moreover there is a huge shortage of medical staff and protective equipment on top of electricity shortages. The Sudanese government has imposed a nation-wide curfew from 8pm to 6am, and closed down its borders on land and air. Gatherings have been prohibited and markets and schools have been closed.

### Only 80 ventilators and 40 critical care beds in public hospitals serve a population of 44 million

In response to the crisis, forms of self-organisation which emerged last year as key drivers of popular mobilisation during the revolution are stepping up to try and fill the gap. The neighbourhood Resistance Committees which have continued to organise

political activities and intervene in local social life are conducting campaigns to raise public awareness of the virus and sanitising markets, bakeries, mosques and cafes.

They are leading a drive to inform the public on how to protect themselves from the virus. This started with handing out leaflets on streets combined with social media campaigns.

Some Resistance Committees had already taken on a role in protecting the people when the state fails over the bread crisis, intervening to set volunteer observers in state-run bakeries to stop flour being smuggled out to sell on the black market.

The Covid-19 crisis will test the limits of both the transitional government's reforms and popular organisation even more sharply, however, and some Sudanese organisations have begun to raise more radical demands.

The Communist Party of Sudan has for example, demanded that military and police hospitals should be handed over to the public health system.

Read more background on the Sudanese revolution online at [www.menasolidaritynetwork.com](http://www.menasolidaritynetwork.com)

# ALGERIA: A YEAR IN THE STREETS



Protesters and police in Algiers  
Photo: Zoheir Aberkane

For the past year, a massive popular movement has repeatedly shaken Algeria. **Shelagh Smith** draws up a balance sheet

On 12 December 2019 a new president was declared elected in Algeria, Abdelmadjid Tebboune, despite the fact that the majority of Algerians boycotted the election, which they saw as illegitimate.

Since February 2019 millions have protested peacefully, every Tuesday and Friday (and sometimes on Saturday and Sunday), against a corrupt regime, and have been demanding system change. The movement, or Hirak, forced president Abdelaziz Bouteflika to step down after 20 years in power, after he proposed to stand for a 5th term. It then forced the postponement of two presidential elections, in April and July, because people refused simply a change

of faces at the top in an intact system. Protesters want the removal of an entrenched political and economic class that has held power in Algeria since independence from France in 1962. They demand a civil, not a military state, based on the rule of law.

The protests are always peaceful, and full of satire, humour, chants and songs. There is extensive use of social media, especially Facebook. Some of the detainees have been arrested merely because of their support for the Hirak on Facebook.

There have been many sectional strikes, for example education, health, public administration, lawyers, magistrates, port workers and the energy sector. Teachers have a long history of struggle, both on socio-economic issues and also in support of the popular movement.

Several general strikes took place between March and December. A nationwide general strike was called for the four days prior to the December

election. It was solid in Kabylia; in Bejaia there was a united call by numerous trade unions, political parties and other organisations. However, it was only partly successful in Algiers, and failed to win the same level of support in other areas of the country.

The Algerian government is known as “Le Pouvoir” (The Power) or “the gang”, with power shared between the army, the National Liberation Front (FLN), businessmen and the intelligence services. The army has played the key role since independence, and also has a stake in major businesses. During 2019, General Gaïd Salah was Algeria’s strongman and the de facto ruler, until he died in December. He was succeeded by Saïd Chengriha, Acting Chief of Military Staff.

In June, Gaïd Salah banned Amazigh (Berber) flags, and blocked access to Algiers for demonstrators. There has been an increase in repression since June 2019, with mass arrests and heavy policing. Hundreds have been



kept in pre-trial detention, and prison sentences handed out – “justice by telephone” as the Algerians call it. The media is controlled by the government, journalists have been imprisoned and censorship has increased.

There has been an anti-corruption campaign, widely seen as a war of the ruling clans. There are also attempts to divide and rule, with accusations of “foreign interference.” But significantly, the Hirak has united Kabylia with the rest of the country for the first time in recent history in opposing the regime, and it has resisted the divide and rule tactics of repression.

Since Tebboune’s election, there has been talk of dialogue and negotiation, but repression and arbitrary arrests have continued. Human rights defenders, journalists, activists and politicians are still detained.

Hundreds remain in custody, some for “harming the integrity of the national territory,” which carries sentences of up to 10 years, others for “undermining the morale of the troops”, and “unarmed assembly”. Others, like Samira Messouci, elected representative for the RCD (Rally for Culture and Democracy), have served six months in prison merely for carrying the Berber flag.

The situation of prisoners and detainees is contradictory. By 6th February Tebboune had pardoned nearly 10,000 people sentenced to less than 18 months. But the CNLD (National Committee for the Liberation of Detainees) said the pardons excluded the 142 political prisoners who were still in preventive detention, while over a thousand are being prosecuted for participating in the Hirak.

Some detainees have been acquitted, others released after serving their sentences or pending trial. Human rights activists denounce the current situation of many detainees, who employers refuse to reinstate in their jobs on their release.

In an attempt to end the Hirak, the new president Tebboune is meeting with some politicians who are in favour of dialogue under the government’s terms, including the main Islamist party the MSP (Society for Peace Movement). The Hirak has rejected calls for dialogue with what they see as an illegitimate president, and refuse to be represented by political parties who claim to speak for them.

Tebboune has set up a “committee

of experts” to amend the constitution. Critics point out the tradition of previous constitutional amendments which have done nothing to alter the real exercise of power by the regime, and serve only to highlight the crisis in the system.

While the president talks of dialogue, opposition politicians are being repressed. Karim Tabbou, leader of the UDS (Democratic and Social Union) and a popular activist, suffered six months in solitary confinement, charged with “harming national unity”. The verdict in March was six months in prison, six months suspended, with a ban on taking part in public activities. Leading militant Samir Benlarbi was acquitted after months in detention, but has been rearrested twice since his release.



**'No' to the presidential election**  
Photo: Zoheir Aberkane

The journalist Fodil Boumala served six months before being acquitted. President of the RAJ (Youth Action Rally), Abdelouahab Fersaoui, remains in detention since October when he was arrested at a rally to support detainees.

Louisa Hanoune, general secretary of the PT (Workers’ Party), had been sentenced to 15 years by a military court for “conspiring against the state and the army”. Her sentence was reduced on appeal to three years, so she has been released with a remaining suspended sentence of 27 months.

The PAD (Forces of the Pact for a Democratic Alternative) is a movement formed during the Hirak, and involves opposition political parties, associations, members of civil society, women, young people, human rights organisations and autonomous trade unions. It calls for a transitional period for the establishment of the rule of law, a sovereign constituent process,

the independence of the judiciary, free expression and the release of Hirak prisoners of conscience. The PAD rejects the masquerade of the last presidential election and the current political operation which, through “consultations” and “constitutional review”, aims to legitimise the same power in place.

Algeria also faces economic problems and increased financial pressure caused by a fall in energy revenue and foreign exchange reserves. The regime decided in 2013 to exploit the reserves of shale gas in the Sahara, the third largest reserve in the world, a decision supported by major oil companies.

Fracking will endanger the precious fresh water reserves under the Sahara which are shared by Algeria, Tunisia and Libya. In 2014 there was a huge local campaign of 45,000 against shale gas, resulting in a suspension of drilling in 2015. Now Tebboune has announced drilling for shale gas will resume, but in 2020 it’s the millions in the Hirak who now say “No to shale gas”.

After one year of demonstrations, strikes and boycotts, the stalemate may lead some to be tempted into compromise. Trying to regain legitimacy, the regime declared February 22 a national holiday for the “blessed Hirak”, and is courting certain politicians to support its revision of the constitution, while continuing with harsh repression. It has no intention of giving up any of its power.

The twice-weekly demonstrations had become smaller, but the anniversary of the Hirak saw a rejuvenation of the movement. However, the coronavirus pandemic has now forced a change of tactic.

For the first time since the start of the Hirak over a year ago, and by common agreement, all demonstrations were suspended on 17 March. Prominent activist Karim Tabbou urged using this period to prepare for future struggles and to preserve the achievements of the Hirak, as the regime will try to use the situation to snuff out the revolution.

The demands of the movement remain: “a civil not a military state”, “free the political prisoners”, “an independent judiciary”, “freedom of the press”, “the people want the downfall of the regime.” The Algerian people will find other ways to continue the struggle.

[Turn to p.26 for more on Algerian political prisoners and solidarity action.](#)

# Grassroots democracy

## Béjaia's general strike vs the presidential elections

In the province of Bejaia, organisation from below delivered a solid general strike to boost an election boycott says university lecturer **Kamel Aissat**, an activist with the socialist PST party.



Protesters march in Bejaia a day after the presidential election  
Photo: Collectif indépendante libre des femmes de Bejaia via Facebook

The general strike which took place in Béjaia province and which was promoted in several other provinces was a political strike with the basic goal of preventing the elections from taking place. It aimed to stop the imposition of elections on the province.

This was an active strike because we called on everybody, all the workers, all the students, all the secondary school teachers who were arrested in front of their schools during strikes, to debate the goals of the strike and to discuss the perspectives of the movement itself. It was a self-organised strike because it wasn't the trade unions who organised and led it, but it was rather through the workers, the school and university students and the shopkeepers organising themselves.

It was also self-organised in the sense that it wasn't led by trade union structures or specific political parties, but rather by the general movement, with all its component parts. Of course there are trade unions as part of this movement, there are also collectives, popular committees from different neighbourhoods, from towns, who are in the committee. It was self-organised by the population from below through general assemblies which debated and took key decisions.

These general assemblies are places

for debate, often in public squares in the town centre or in the villages. They are organised by the neighbourhood committees, by the activists, among whom are trade unionists, workers and students. In the assemblies people discuss the state of the movement and perspectives and decide what actions to take.

### General assemblies are places for debate, often in public squares in the town centre or in the villages

General assemblies in factories and universities are a bit different. They exist in a few factories and universities, but it is very limited, unfortunately. There are general assemblies of workers over political questions, but you have to understand that the trade union bureaucracy prevents the emergence of factory committees and trade unions which are genuinely independent of the regime.

Why did the general strike take off in Béjaia while other provinces weren't on strike? This region has a particular history, it has long-standing working class and left-wing traditions which go back to the 70s and 80s, and there is a generation of far-left militants.

However, across the country, Algerian workers have, in general, taken part in the political movement since 22 February 2019, as citizens, rather than as workers. They haven't responded to it as a class, through their social organisations, nor through developing forms of independent political expression. This is one of the major weaknesses of the movement in Algeria, despite the fact that this is a profoundly social movement. It is certainly democratic, but its roots are social.

Over several decades, workers have had no opportunities for democratic organisation. The regime has been able, in a sense, to impose an authoritarian regime on all the institutions connected to the world of work, as well as on political organisations.

That is why the workers took part in this strike organising themselves. They were the ones who decided what forms of strike action to take and what the minimum levels of service would be during the strike, in association with the trade union organisations, or in some cases with other organisations where there weren't trade unions. In some factories collectives have been set up, although this is on a modest scale.

The call for the general strike was launched with a publicity campaign



several months ago. I recall that the collective statement calling for the general strike noted that the departure of Bouteflika in April 2019 was only achieved as a result of the general strike in strategic sectors, particularly the petroleum sector, which took place between 8-12 March.

This strike upset the equilibrium of the regime, pushing them to get rid of Bouteflika, as the goal was to save the regime itself, while sacrificing its “face” and his allies.

The faction of the bourgeoisie which was in power up until 15 March was knocked out by this general strike, while there was another faction which used the general strike in order to launch the process which included the imposition of the illegitimate president, Ben Salah, and an illegitimate government, followed by attempts to organise two elections which were blocked by the people.

The call for a general strike in Béjaia was launched by the popular citizens’ committees, and by a large number of trade unions in the province, including the local trade union bureaucracy of the national union federation UGTA which issued a call for four days of strike action in defiance of its own national leadership.

Independent trade unions also called for the strike, and the traders and small shopkeepers also backed it. Transport companies shut down, so the whole province was paralysed: the airport, port, factories, schools, university.

Daily life, commerce, everything was struck “dead” across the province. Meanwhile the population organised, where it could, to blockade the polling stations in order to stop the elections, and to stop the violation of their democratic rights.

There are also the political parties which are allied through the Pacte pour l’alternative démocratique (PAD - Pact for a Democratic Alternative). This is a group of organisations - not “left” organisations, but democratic organisations - which have come together around a set of demands for the release of political prisoners, the right to protest in Algiers and elsewhere, some basic demands from a democratic point of view.

Evidently, the PAD brings together all the parties which consider that the rupture with the regime in Algeria cannot be achieved by holding new elections now, and can only be achieved



‘Open spaces for debate and reflection in our universities and neighbourhoods’  
Photo: Collectif indépendante libre des femmes de Bejaia via Facebook

by the refoundation of all the existing constitutional texts, by the people, organised from below.

The current movement in Algeria, and the general strikes, don’t have an identifiable leadership. This lies usually with collectives of some trades unions, or women’s organisations, feminist collectives, activists from particular neighbourhoods. The Friday demonstrations also play an important role amplifying the strike calls.

### Workers were the majority in the general assemblies in the neighbourhoods and in the villages

Unfortunately there weren’t any general assemblies in the workplaces during the general strike, because transport wasn’t functioning so workers couldn’t get to their workplaces, except where there was a minimum service.

However, workers were the majority in the neighbour and village general assemblies, and it was they who prevented the security forces from opening the polling stations.

They set up vigilance committees which stayed in front of the polling stations for 48 hours in order to stop any intrusion by the security forces.

There were also debates in the neighbourhoods, in the villages and in public squares about what kind of Algeria we want to see tomorrow. This was useful because it is during the debates that social questions emerge and take on importance for the next day’s battle.

The principles of the general strike which were adopted for the four

days were those of a “classic” general strike - creating a “dead” city, like we experienced during the war of liberation, in particular during the Battle of Algiers, when there was a two-week general strike across the whole of Algiers to say that “we are with the revolution.”

This was the historical reference, and this is what was implied in this strike. It was decided that the bakeries, pharmacies, health services must remain open because this is what would ensure confidence from society.

In terms of the factories, it was the workers themselves with their trade unions and local committees who decided which sections to shut down and which would be under minimal security, in particular for the dairy industry, for services such as gas, as we are dependent on bottled butane gas. So these services were assured.

After 5pm all the shops opened. Petrol stations were shut from 6am to 5pm, but they opened at night to ensure that lorries and buses in particular could get fuel. We had demonstrations everyday, so we couldn’t do without vehicles entirely.

The strike was organised like this after we learnt from the strike in March, which was very hard, and nothing was functioning at all.

When you are taking action, the impact needs to be on your adversaries and not on wider society so there was an effort to limit the negative effect of the strike on the population.

Read a longer version online at [www.menasolidaritynetwork.com](http://www.menasolidaritynetwork.com)

## Iraq's popular movement takes on the sectarian state



'No to Iran, No to America' - students march in Baghdad  
Photo: Ali Dabdab via Facebook

# 'WE JUST WANT THEM ALL TO GO'

On 1 October protesters demanding an end to corruption in Iraq flooded into Baghdad's Tahrir Square. People scarred by years of war, occupation and sectarian violence came together to demand a better future while tens of thousands joined mass demonstrations calling for radical political and social change. **Irang Bak** spoke to Iraqi activists **Sara**, **Muhannad** and **Rawnaq al-Sumaydi** about what sparked the popular movement which targetted Iraq's ruling parties and their links to Iran.

The political system put in place by the US occupying forces in 2003 after the fall of Saddam Hussein's regime has been a key target of protesters' anger, Sara told us.

"When the US-led invasion overthrew Saddam Hussein's regime, they brought in several outcast individuals and political parties. Some of these political parties were affiliated with militias trained mainly in Iran for more than two decades. These were then elected in the hope that they would pull Iraq out of the misery it was in. The electoral system however was sectarian in nature, following what is called the muhasasa system."

Muhasasa refers to the parcelling up of the state institutions and public services between different political parties. Political leaders, usually representing particular religious or ethnic groups, took control of ministries and government departments, then doled out jobs, resources and even arms to their followers as a 'reward' for their votes.

Hopes that the fall of Saddam

Hussein's brutal dictatorship would bring an end to war and the crushing poverty that was the legacy of years of economic sanctions were quickly dashed, Sara said. "So we elected these militias that had deep government ties as well as ties to the Iranian regime but soon after that the country got hit by suicide bombers, and then later by ISIS."

Over the decades, each round of warfare has left behind new victims, often from different religious and ethnic groups.

"For example, during Saddam's time, the Shi'a suffered quite badly. The Kurds suffered at some point. When ISIS came, the Yazidis of the North suffered," Sara explained. The current wave of protests has overwhelmingly adopted the Iraqi flag, and raised slogans invoking national unity, as protesters hope to erase some of the divisions and scars of the past.

"We all suffered at the end of the day and we all deserve to benefit from all the revenue that is generated in the country. We all deserve to have a



strong infrastructure.”

Demonstrators are angry that although nearly two decades have passed since the US-led invasion, millions of Iraqis are trapped in poverty, dependent on barely-functioning public services and crumbling infrastructure.

“What is puzzling is that the poverty in Iraq persists despite the fact that the revenue the country is generating mainly from oil is way beyond what we were producing during Saddam Hussein’s regime days. So it just doesn’t make sense,” Sara said.

This contrast between the wealth accruing to leading politicians and ordinary people’s daily lives has been a major factor behind the protests, Rawnaq al-Sumaydi told us.

“You see images of a child who has got cancer on the floor of a hospital in Basra because there is no bedding, while at the same time billions of dollars are spent by the people in government. So can you see the imbalance? When you look at the services that are provided for people, it’s really heartbreaking. I think this revolution will be a chance for drastic change for Iraq.”

The failure of successive governments to solve Iraq’s electricity crisis, leaving millions to suffer the effects of soaring temperatures in summer is another factor driving protesters into the streets, Muhannad said.

“I’m from Baghdad. There is only electricity for two hours a day, and two hours at night during the summer time when the temperature is 40, 50 degrees and sometimes even higher. You have to pay from your pocket to get it.”

Political parties make a killing running generators to supplement the intermittent service from the national grid. And this fuels more violence as money from the generators is channeled into buying arms: “They are killing us with our own money,” Muhannad argued.

“I’m from Basra, where the temperature actually reached 64, 65 degrees in the summer,” Sara said. “In that sort of temperature with no electricity you’re waiting for generators. It’s not only expensive, but it creates pollution, not only with toxic gases, but with the noise as well. And the other problem with the generators is that they create more heat so temperatures rise even more. It’s a completely deadly combination.”

Meanwhile, public health services are desperately underfunded and often sites of corruption, violence and

extortion. Sara recounted a traumatic experience when her son needed hospital treatment during a visit to Iraq.

“My son was only little. They put the cannula in his arm and it was on the wrong side. It didn’t stay in place. They didn’t have plasters to hold it in place, so I was asked to hold it for six hours and make sure it didn’t move. Of course it moved and the cannula came out. And obviously, he had a swollen arm and I thought I was going to lose him.”

Adding to her distress, one of the hospital managers, who was linked to a political leader, began to mistreat the family.

“She told her staff not to deliver any medical treatment to this patient. I had to find somebody on the phone who was in charge in order to get my son out and get a private doctor to see him. And this was in a public hospital.”

Services across the public sector have been turned into means for corrupt



politicians to buy influence and enrich themselves at the expense of ordinary people, Rawnaq said.

“You have to pay a lot of money to get a job. Your manager might be somebody who had no education whatsoever but then they will be on multiples of your salary. This is where the issue is. There is so much money in the country, where it’s basically a lake of oil. But all the revenues are actually going towards all these politicians’ interests, not the country’s interests, which is where the problem is.”

“So the youth are seeing this. There is no hope for the future as they can’t have good education, cannot get jobs,

and therefore cannot settle down or get married. Then what is the hope for the future? Graduates demonstrated for weeks because there are no jobs.”

This is why so many unemployed graduates and students have played a key role in the protests. Regular marches on Sundays to Baghdad’s Tahrir Square have mobilised tens of thousands of students.

A major theme of the protest movement has been opposition to the influence of the Iranian regime over Iraq. This has been expressed in criticisms of political parties which are supportive of Iran, and in attacks on Iranian consulates in Najaf and Kerbala, which were torched by protesters.

“Najaf and Kerbala are being stereotyped or perceived to be linked to Iran because these are the holiest Shi’a places in Iraq,” Sara said. “Burning the consulate was a symbolic act to express how angry they were with the situation and also to break the perceived image that they’re linked to Iran.”

“They want to free the country so we can live with respect and dignity. They want a country where Iraqi revenues are actually used to develop the infrastructure from the bottom up and used to improve public services, education, health care, clean water and power supplies. They want to have the right to have free speech and also to express yourself and also to take on whatever religious beliefs you choose.”

Young protesters have been promoting boycotts of Iranian and Turkish products and encouraging people to buy Iraqi goods instead. For Rawnaq, this “deepening economic and social awareness really shows that this revolution is not one type, but it’s actually covering so many aspects. It’s like an awakening in all levels and you can see it is leaderless even though it is a spontaneous revolution.”

Restricting the military and political power of the powerful militias, such as the Popular Mobilisation Forces which were formed in order to fight ISIS after the group seized control of Mosul and large swathes of northern Iraq, has also been high on protesters’ lists of demands, said Rawnaq.

“This is one of the demands of the people in Tahrir Square. They are asking that arms should be restricted for use only by the police and the army, not for those militias. Because now that the government is not powerful, all these militias are taking advantage.”



Students have taken to the streets regularly since October  
Photo: Ali Dabdab via Facebook

Not all existing political leaders have been hostile to the protests. Some demonstrators support Muqtada al-Sadr, a major political figure from Najaf who said he backed the popular movement. Rawnaq was not convinced that Al-Sadr would bring about real change, however.

"The people who sacrificed their blood and everything have demanded a change in this political system, this mentality. Supporting someone who is from current system would defeat the whole point. Now there will be a transitional government, but it shouldn't be in place for a long time."

Sara agreed: "We just want them to all go and we don't want a change of faces. It's because their hands are contaminated with the blood of so many youth they have killed unfairly and in cold blood."

Despite the high levels of repression, the activists said that the sense of solidarity generated by the mass movement has been incredible.

"After 1 October, everything changed," said Rawnaq. "I've got a new hope. This time, I feel like it's a sign telling me that I shouldn't give up."

"The occupation looks like a small family, Muhannad told us. "Honestly, it is like another country. In Tahrir Square, they cook for the people, but some don't even ask for money, by the

way. People say they need food and blankets, and others just ask for what they need and people start donating."

The square itself has been revived after years of neglect, said Rawnaq.

"They have put flower pots everywhere, and they cleaned the pavements. When I was there before, unfortunately nothing had been built since 2003. The old pavements were not maintained and everything was broken. But the protesters cleaned and painted all the walls, and have decorated it with candles."

### They want to free the country, so we can live with respect and dignity.

The shrines to the movement's martyrs reflect its diversity. "All the people who died have candles in Tahrir Square with holy books. So people come even if they are not one of their families, but they do say a prayer and read Quran for them. You can see Christians, Muslims from all sects, Yazidis and Sabians. In London even Iraqi Jews have actually joined the demonstrations in solidarity."

"One of the beautiful things about this revolution is how they organise. They put up tents. One tent is like a hospital with very simple supplies. And

they use for example Pepsi bottles to counteract the effects of the tear gas like an antidote."

"One of the tents is for the first-aid supplies. Another tent is for the lost property. Documents, money, phones or anything that gets lost. One group has been cooking with massive amounts of food for everyone, even for the poor people who've got nothing, like the homeless."

"There are girls or ladies just making bread, for example. So really it's like a beehive, working in an extremely organised way and it is beautiful how the community all came together. This is what gives us hope that society is really alive."

Sara told us that the movement has opened many people's eyes to the idea that they could work side-by-side for common goals. "This is the beauty of it because you rise from this heavy-handed influence of the government and different politicians and groups, who try to segregate you depending on your religion and background, to suddenly realize that actually we had never been divided before. People are all together."

Sara, Muhannad and Rawnaq were interviewed in December 2019. Read a longer version of this article online at [www.menasolidaritynetwork.com](http://www.menasolidaritynetwork.com)





# REFUGEES AND THE LEBANESE REVOLUTION

The revolt in Lebanon has brought thousands into the streets demanding change.

**Helen Patuck** asks **Sophie Chamas** if it will expand to include demands for justice for the millions who are not Lebanese citizens.

**T**he government doesn't want to take responsibility for economic instability and precarity, so it puts that blame on refugee populations, even though the evidence points in the opposite direction," Sophie explains.

"In terms of Syrians, the Lebanese economy has benefited from the Syrian presence. You need to turn the blame away from the fact that you, as a government, are more invested in foreign investment, the things that will help you accumulate wealth, at

the expense of the wider population. So you use the scapegoat, which is the refugee, and then you crack down on the refugee. It's really that simple."

So is there a "right time" to make refugees a part of the Lebanese revolution? "There is this really powerful sense of the revolution being for the Lebanese," says Sophie, describing how some protesters have been asked to remove Palestinian flags during the protests in Lebanon. This was a common sentiment, which she also witnessed in the diaspora protests in London last autumn.

"I tried to argue with some of the organisers about it, and again it's this framing of: it's not the time, it doesn't make sense to do that. To me, it's really abhorrent that you could tell someone who's living in that country - in many cases more affected by these policies than a middle class activist would be - to tell them to lower their flag. They don't even want your country, they're

raising their own flag and their own identity. You're asking them to remove that because they were displaced to your context."

Xenophobia is pervasive in Lebanon. Discussing the lack of solidarity for Palestinians in both the July 2019 protests, and the wider Lebanese revolution against the government which began in October that same year, Sophie observed how very few people showed solidarity with Palestinians.

"It doesn't mean that if there's a revolution that's blaming the ruling class that people are not still blaming refugees for their problems," she says.

Sophie believes racism is at the core Lebanese attitudes towards its resident refugee population. "Of course it has political roots, and economic roots, but you will hear in many spaces a cultural discourse about contamination - physical, biological, cultural, religious contamination - and the fear of the terrorist."

Underlying the relative silence around Palestinian struggles is the memory of the 1975-1991 Lebanese civil war, a complicated legacy which remains largely untouched by local or national restorative justice processes.

Yet there have been certain activists and activist groups who have made a concerted effort to articulate constant solidarity with Palestinians.

At the forefront of this vision have been certain queer feminists who have always incorporated refugees and migrant workers and other revolutionary contexts into their chants. “This is not just to show solidarity with refugees,” Sophie tells us, “but to articulate a vision of a Lebanon that is not nationalistic: a country for all its people and all the people who live in it.”

Though some might argue that this is just 1 percent of the population, Sophie argues that the risks undertaken to share the Palestinian struggle, and the considerable impact of this solidarity, should not be underestimated.

“These are people who often have bull-horned an attempt to position themselves physically in ways so that they will be heard often at great personal risk. Because some of these women, for example, have been accused of treason and found themselves being investigated by state security. So they’ve taken this risk to stand, visibly, literally on the shoulders of somebody, so that they can articulate this sentiment, and I don’t think it’s an insignificant thing for those words to reverberate in the space of the revolution.”

Women have always been present in political mobilizations in Lebanon and Sophie explains how queer feminists in particular have used the space of the protests to articulate really complex visions through modes of refusal. “They are unabashedly anti-capitalist, and anti-sectarian and queer and feminist. Their chants have linked refugee rights, to migrant rights, to queer rights, to feminist rights. It’s a holistic vision of emancipation.”

With some chants focused on the re-appropriation of derogatory swear words against women and the LGBTQI+ community, Sophie argues that an attempt to shift the public discourse around these issues is actually an important precedent to a demand.

“It doesn’t make sense in a country that is this conservative to send some



Blocking the road in Beirut, October 2019  
Photo: Wikimedia Commons

sort of formal petition, saying: and now include LGBTQI+ rights,” says Sophie. “That doesn’t mean that this is not considered a fundamental and important right to these people, but I feel like the way they are pushing for it is by inserting themselves within the discourse, and refusing the idea that: this will have to come up later, for now we should just focus on economics. There’s an insistence on using the fact that you are assembled with people, that you are comrades within this space, using that space to engage in these interventions.”

“I think what’s really amazing is that there’s a lot of grassroots organizing. People aren’t just saying: we don’t want the government, and then going home or sitting in the street. There are attempts to organise from below that have the potential of really creating a lasting social movement for change in the country. There is an acknowledgment among a lot of people that what this revolution has started is something that will be a very long-term process.”

“In the end, you’re talking about

a complete socio-political upheaval. It doesn’t happen in a day. So people who have that kind of framework for thinking about revolution don’t think that at any point in the next couple of months, or next year, a government is going to be put together that they are going to like.”

Refusal of the government is a very important political practice, but Sophie observes that what people are doing beside this critique is setting up alternative unions or intervening within unions when they have elections so that independents can be elected.

“There are attempts at creating these spaces where people can organise around their labour, attempts to think about these mechanisms as things that will have lasting transformative effects on society,” Sophie tells us.

“You’re actually creating a base so that if eventually parliamentary elections happen for example, then you’re not just building a campaign from scratch and suddenly trying to appeal to people. You’ve been doing this work on the ground through unions, for example, for years.”



This is the idea amongst a lot of activists. They are creating the base through which they can organise and promote particular political discourses so that when the opportunity presents itself to actually create an alternative government, or system of governance, there is a base of support for that.

"Not just a base of support," says Sophie, "but a base of people who have thought collectively about what that government should look like."

Sophie warns us away from the assumption that sectarianism on a societal level has been dissolved through these collective protests.

"There is an assumption that people can't share a protest space and share a moment of euphoria but then revert back - that they can't hold those things together."

"Sectarianism is a political system but it is not only that," Sophie explains.

"It is a lifeworld for a lot of people, which means it's a disposition, it's an orientation, a way of moving in the world, a source of dignity and a source of emotion. I think it can be suspended, abandoned, set aside and returned to."

Sophie observes that these moments of encounter between sects in the Lebanese revolution are important expressions of collectivity, but they do not necessarily mean - or require - the sacrifice of identity.

Sophie draws attention to another vulnerable community in Lebanon, migrant domestic workers, who she describes as incredible political organisers prior to the present revolutionary moment. Many of these women bring socialist politics from home states like the Philippines.

"They were creating a political vision which intersected with other people's issues, so labour rights, gender rights,

and sexual rights, and also creating a sense of kinship."

"I don't believe in nationalistic nationalism," says Sophie. "I don't think that citizenship as a framework in which a citizen deserves rights in exchange for duties is an egalitarian or emancipatory framework. In a context like Lebanon it sets aside millions of people that also call that country home, and on whose labour it has been running for the longest time. Migrant workers form the foundations of the care industry. I think it is unacceptable to design a vision for the country that doesn't include, on an equal footing, migrant workers with citizens."

*Sophie Chamas is a Lebanese activist and teaches Queer Politics at SOAS, University of London. She spoke to Helen Patuck in February 2020.*

# PALESTINIANS SEARCH FOR SOLIDARITY

Why now?" Zeinab al-Hajj asks about the July 2019 changes to the labour laws for Palestinians living in Lebanon. The laws, which have existed since 1952, state that for every foreigner a Lebanese firm employs, the firm must employ three more Lebanese. Palestinians have been a long-standing exception to these laws.

However, last summer the Lebanese Labour Minister, Camille Abou Suleiman, decided that Palestinians in Lebanon were henceforth considered "foreigners" under labour law.

Lebanese employers must now apply for foreign worker permits for their Palestinian staff - and hire three times as many staff - or fire them. The question of why the law is being applied to Palestinians now, seventy years into their displacement, is urgent for Zeinab, a Palestinian refugee activist who has lived in Lebanon her whole life.

Like many, Zeinab lost her job as an executive secretary in a Lebanese firm last summer. Her job had allowed her to support her family, including her terminally ill mother, three brothers and five sisters, for over fifteen years.

Her experience also enabled her to become a prominent and respected activist in her community. Since losing

her job, Zeinab has been carrying out social activism in her home, the long-standing refugee camp, Shatila, in Beirut.

"People don't have jobs, so they don't have money to buy bread for their kids and babies don't have milk," she told me. Families in the Palestinian diaspora of Denmark, Germany and Sweden are financially supporting Zeinab and other activists in their outreach work since the law was applied.

"We are delivering bread every day, it is crazy," Zeinab adds.

**"We don't have the right to work, we don't have the right to own an apartment outside of the camp, now we don't even have the right to build inside the camp."**

Hardship is a reality the Palestinian people have known since al-Nakba, "the disaster," of the mid-twentieth century. The creation of the state of Israel in 1948 forced many Palestinians to leave their homes and become part of the global Palestinian diaspora.

Zeinab's family, like many others, fled to neighbouring Lebanon, where resistance to Israel encouraged many Palestinians to maintain their sacred "right to return" to the state of Palestine and settle in refugee camps established by UNRWA, the UN agency set up to support Palestinian refugees in 1949.

Zeinab's family lived first in southern Lebanon before moving to Shatila Camp, Beirut, shortly after it was created in 1952. The family suffered greatly during the Lebanese Civil War, surviving the devastation of the Sabra and Shatila massacre of over 3,500 people. Zeinab is now faced with a new kind of devastation in Shatila, where breadwinners can no longer provide for their families.

"We don't have human rights," says Zeinab. "We don't have the right to work, we don't have the right to own an apartment outside of the camp, now we don't even have the right to build inside the camp."

Palestinians must build vertically, on top of existing structures, because they cannot build beyond the 200m square area allocated for the refugee camp since 1952. The original site was built to settle 7000 people, but Zeinab



**Palestinians protest in Shatila camp for employment rights**  
Photo: courtesy of Zeinab al-Hajj

estimates a population of 35,000 since the Syrian conflict began in 2010.

Zeinab described how the Palestinian protests began in July and erupted in all Palestinian refugee camps across Lebanon.

"Daily we did this. Young, old, always sharing in these protests, for three months," said Zeinab, noting how the main political leaders of the camps, from the Palestinian Liberation Organization, together with Hamas and Jihad, organised the protests.

Lebanese civil rights organisations also took part and added weight to the movement, eventually forcing the Labour Minister to revisit his decision.

However, any momentum created was lost in the nationwide protests across Lebanon, which demanded an end to impunity for corrupt political elites and led to the resignation of Prime Minister Saad Hariri on 29 October, 2019.

I asked Zeinab if Lebanese protesters took up the Palestinian issue of the labour laws in October.

"For sure no," said Zeinab. "This group of young Lebanese are protesting against the economic situation, the political authority - against what this authority has done since the 1990s.

They don't ask for our rights, they ask for their own rights."

When I asked if the Palestinians joined the Lebanese protests, Zeinab replied that Palestinian activists did not, as "we do not have the right for that."

She explained how political leaders from the PLO and authorities from within Palestine itself discouraged Palestinian participation. Individuals may have attended, but many heeded the warnings from their community leaders.

Zeinab explained the general fear: "If they catch us, they will consider us the problem."

A fear of being "the problem" has deep-seated origins for Zeinab and her community, who live with the legacy of Palestinian struggles against Israel from within Lebanon's borders, and feel blame from the Lebanese community for the 1975-1991 civil war.

These new labour laws are the latest development in the structural violence committed by the Lebanese state towards its Palestinian refugee population.

However, Zeinab insists Palestinians are not the problem: "As we are living in Lebanon, we are adding to the economic

situation, we are making it strong, we are working here, we are saving our money here. So we are not an economic problem - no, we are helping them to grow their economy."

I asked Zeinab if these discriminatory new labour laws make her and her community reconsider acknowledging the state of Israel and going home. She said some were starting to consider this, offering this hard truth: "who has no land has no identity, who has no identity has no land."

As the labour laws remains the same, and continuing instability and protests in Lebanon make change seem distant, I asked Zeinab what she wanted from the Lebanese government in the future.

She replied with urgency: "I want from them one thing, just. To give us our human rights. To let us work, to let us own an apartment, to let us, please, feel that we are human. Just we need from them these things, nothing more, nothing less."

*Zeinab al-Hajj was talking to Helen Patuck. Search online for your local Palestine Solidarity Campaign group to get involved in solidarity action.*



# To locked-down London, a letter of hope from Raqqa in Syria ...

**Helen Patuck** met **Khaled** a year ago while working in Syria. Here he shares a message of solidarity and practical advice on how to keep hopes up when it isn't safe to leave home.

25th March, 2020  
Raqqa, Syria

Hi Helen,

I am very glad that you and your family are fine and I assure you that there is no Coronavirus in northeastern Syria at the moment, knowing that I have taken all medical precautions to prevent Coronavirus. I am happy to help you with some information about how to live at home for a long time without worry because I have done this for 3 years while ISIS has been in Raqqa.

First, you should set a daily programme of tasks to do at home on a daily basis. Every day I used to make something new at home in order to keep my daughter and wife calm, like I am doing a play with my wife in order to make my daughter happy, and I make sweets by hand for my wife. Sometimes I burnt the cakes but my wife rejoices in this because I try to do something she loves and my daughter too.

Therefore, I used to tire a lot of days and nights in order to make them happy, as I was the source that gives love and hope in their hearts, and I used to play the role of the father for my wife, the role of the friend and the beloved, and I played the clown for my daughter until I saw her laughing every day.

To start with, you should practice your hobbies, such as drawing or reading, or any other thing you would love to do, and talk to your family about hope and the coming days that will be much better than these days. This situation is temporary and will not last long. I told my daughter that schools will return and a happy life will come in coming days, and in light of the Coronavirus, I always alert my wife every morning about washing my hands well, and not approaching patients and people with diseases similar to the look of the Coronavirus, and preventing any sick person from entering my house and making sure to wash the food for cooking, and cooking well before eating. I am on the clock to monitor my daughter and prevent her playing outside the home. I sterilise before for game play outside and sterilise after the end of play and buy lemons and oranges because they contain a lot of vitamin C, which eliminates bacteria.

I pray in every healing prayer for every patient in the world from the Coronavirus and I hope that you are always fine and I pray for you to be happy because you are my friend and because you are a person who loves to do good and to deliver happiness to everyone's hearts. I hope to meet you very soon. If you need anything, let me know, it is a pleasure to offer you any help you need, your friend,

*Khaled*

Khaled's name has been changed

# Will virus crisis delay Israeli plans for West Bank annexation?

Trump's disastrous "peace plan" which was announced to great fanfare by the White House in January, rehashed many ideas dear to the US and Israeli Right including Palestinian acceptance of the Israeli seizure of Jerusalem, the Jordan Valley and large parts of the West Bank.

It made a nod to the notorious idea of "population transfer" popularised by racist Israeli politician Avigdor Liberman, by proposing that some Palestinians living in Israel could be moved into areas under Palestinian control, thus losing their Israeli citizenship and all contact with friends and family on the other side of the highly militarised border.

Meanwhile the illegal Israeli settlements in the West Bank would all gain international recognition as an integral part of the Israeli state.

For Israeli Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu and his competitors on the Israeli far right, the plan's gross trampling of Palestinian rights didn't go nearly far enough. Throughout February and March they egged each other on to fire the starting gun for the outright annexation of the whole of the West Bank.

Two things intervened to stall the process, however. The first was the deeply polarised Israeli electorate which denied Netanyahu an outright majority in the third general election in 12 months. The second, more seriously, was the Covid-19 pandemic and the economic catastrophe trailing in its wake, which is preoccupying governments around the world.

To Palestinians living with the decades-long impact of dispossession and occupation, the virus presents a greater threat than it does to most Israelis. But the possibility one of its victims could be Trump's misnamed "peace plan" would surely be welcome.

*Anne Alexander*



Ambulance destroyed during the Israeli attack on Gaza in 2014 | Photo: Boris Niehaus via Wikimedia Commons

## Gaza: 'For two million people every day is about survival'

Years of blockade have left people highly vulnerable to the impact of Covid-19  
Gaza resident **Ibtisam** tells **Dave Clinch**.

There are only sixty ventilators at the moment in Gaza, with a population of two million people in an area 24km x 10km. Ibtisam is terrified of the consequences of a Covid-19 outbreak after cases have been reported.

The impact of the Israeli occupation and the siege on the health system of Gaza has already been disastrous. Medical staff do not receive a full salary.

Many experienced doctors and surgeons, for example, have left to find work elsewhere, leaving inexperienced staff to deal with the daily medical crisis. This is before the onset of coronavirus.

Qatar is reported to have donated \$15m towards medicines and other essential requirements. "I'm scared because the poverty rates are very high," said Ibtisam. "People are posting on social media that they have no money to buy food. Where there has been casual employment, workers now have to stay at home because places of work have been ordered to close during the coronavirus crisis. Now there is more hardship on top of the Israeli occupation.

"Another real problem is hundreds of most vulnerable poor families who are looked after through the

distribution of food aid. Volunteers and relief workers are frightened about the coronavirus being transmitted. UNRWA (The UN Relief and Works Agency) has suspended the distribution process and this means more and more suffering and deprivation."

Ibtisam said that food security is at a minimum in Gaza. Even though people with regular work are on very low salaries and therefore are counted as poor. One example she gave was a person working in the Hamas administration on 1200 Israeli shekels a month (4.4IS to the pound). Many have large families.

It is clear that the individual toll on lives is incalculable from talking to Ibtisam. She said that the psychological effects of occupation and siege have caused a mental health crisis. The fear of coronavirus is already exacerbating this problem.

"There have been three major Israeli military attacks since the New Year of 2008/09. There is also the problem of water and other services such as electricity which the Israelis have cut.

For two million people every day is about surviving. For some, the virus is seen as just another problem to deal with. Society here is in breakdown."

*Ibtisam's name has been changed. Read a longer version of this interview online at [www.menasolidaritynetwork.com](http://www.menasolidaritynetwork.com).*





Patrick Zaki | Photo: EIPR



UCU and Amnesty commemorate Giulio Regeni's murder | Photo: MESM



Cambridge (L) and SOAS (R) picket line teachouts | Photos: MESM



## Protests and strike teachouts campaign over disappearances Egypt Solidarity

Four years on from the disappearance, torture and murder of Cambridge University PhD student Giulio Regeni while doing fieldwork in Egypt, human rights organisations, students and academics raised the alarm as another graduate student and human rights researcher was snatched by Egyptian security forces.

Thousands of people protested in Italy in support of Patrick George Zaki, a researcher on Gender and Rights at the Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights (EIPR), and a graduate student at the University of Bologna, who was seized by security officials at Cairo airport on Friday 7 February 2020. EIPR said that Patrick “disappeared” for 24 hours, but reappeared in front of public prosecutors in his home town

of Mansoura on 8 February, having been beaten, subjected to electric shocks and interrogated about his work and activism.

Patrick had been studying for a graduate degree at the University of Bologna since August 2019 and was returning to Egypt for a brief visit to his family.

Patrick is the sixth member of EIPR staff to be detained since October 2019, and his arrest is part of a on-going campaign by the security services which has seen thousands of people detained, tortured and arrested in recent months.

This backdrop of severe repression, which has often specifically targeted journalists, human rights campaigners and researchers, is a factor behind the continued vitality of the campaign for justice for Giulio Regeni, following his murder four years ago.

Amnesty Italy, in conjunction with Giulio's parents, organised vigils across the country to mark the fourth anniversary of his disappearance on 25 January. Around 100 people also gathered in Cambridge, in a protest organised by Amnesty and supported by Cambridge UCU.

Campaigners, academics and friends of Giulio also gathered at the Egyptian Embassy in London on 1 Feb to mark the anniversary, where they handed in letters calling for an independent investigation in Giulio's murder and a statement signed by hundreds of academics condemning collusion between UK universities and the al-Sisi regime as they rush to set up “branch campuses” or market their degrees through Egyptian private higher education providers.

The deepening links between UK universities and the al-Sisi regime prompted solidarity action with Patrick and other detainees in Egypt by striking union members at Kings College London, Cambridge and SOAS, where UCU picket lines hosted teach outs led by Egypt Solidarity Initiative highlighting Patrick's case and the ongoing crackdown.

The arrival of coronavirus in Egypt makes the question of solidarity campaigns more urgent than ever, as tens of thousands of prisoners remain at severe risk in overcrowded jails.

[Read more over page on solidarity action with Egyptian political prisoners in the Covid-19 crisis](#)



# BACK THESE CAMPAIGNS



Free Karim Tabbou protest in Algiers  
Photo: Zoheir Abderkane via Facebook

## Free Algerian detainees now

After six months in solitary confinement, Karim Tabbou, leader of the UDS (Democratic and Social Union), and key figure of Algeria's Hirak protest movement, was sentenced to one year in prison on trumped up charges, after criticizing the role of the army in politics.

His lawyers were not informed of the trial, and Karim collapsed in court with a stroke. Health professionals have demanded his transfer to specialist life-saving treatment.

Karim is only one of many prominent Algerian figures who have been detained during the past year, with some receiving long jail sentences. Protesters have also been seized by the police for carrying the Amazigh (Berber) flag on demonstrations.

### What you can do:

- Write to the Algerian Ambassador calling for the immediate release of all political prisoners and prisoners of conscience: 1 - 3 Riding House Street, London W1W 7DR. E-mail: [info@algerianembassy.org.uk](mailto:info@algerianembassy.org.uk)
- Put a resolution to your trade union branch calling for action in solidarity with Algerian political prisoners
- Read more online at [www.menasolidaritynetwork.com](http://www.menasolidaritynetwork.com)



Egyptian activists are using online campaigns to mobilise for prisoners | Photo: Revsoc.me via Facebook

## Back calls for prisoner release

Hundreds of thousands of prisoners in the region's insanitary and overcrowded jails are at risk of from coronavirus, human rights campaigners have warned. They include thousands of political prisoners detained after torture and abuse following sham trials on the flimsiest of pretexts. A statement signed by human rights and legal organisations from Bahrain, Syria, Lebanon, Egypt, Kuwait, Britain, Italy and France highlights the threat to prisoners across the region how are routinely denied access to adequate medical care.

In Egypt political prisoners such as Hisham Fouad, Haitham Mohamedain, Mahienour el-Masry, Patrick Zaki and tens of thousands of others are at severe risk while in prison, despite campaigns urging the Egyptian regime to release prisoners to ease overcrowding and slow the transmission of the disease.

Egyptian activists have launched online campaigns calling for the release of prisoners.

### What you can do:

- Write to the Egyptian Ambassador calling for the immediate release of all political prisoners: 26 South Street, London W1K 1DW

## Stand up for migrant rights

Dozens of migrant rights and campaign groups in the UK and Ireland have signed an open letter to the UK and Irish governments calling for all undocumented, destitute and migrant people to be granted leave to remain in the UK irrespective of their citizenship so that they can access healthcare, accommodation and follow public health care guidance in the Covid-19 crisis.

One of the signatories to the Open Letter, All African Women's Group, said: "Many of us are living in dangerous and abusive conditions, either in slum asylum hostels or as unwelcome guests in other people's homes."

"We need money of our own and the right to stay. Now is the time for the government to take practical measures to prevent infection. Now is not a time for racism, segregation, enforced destitution or a hostile environment for anyone. We will only survive if everyone has status in the UK and can get food, healthcare and housing."

### What you can do:

- Sign the petition initiated by refugee charity RAPAR online at [www.rapar.co.uk](http://www.rapar.co.uk)
- Highlight the work done by migrant workers in the health service and other frontline roles during the #ClapforNHS doorstep demonstrations





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

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**Strike**  
**إضراب**  
**Solidarity**  
**تضامن**

### MENA Solidarity

[menasolidaritynetwork.com](http://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 NEU unions and a number of other trade union regions and branches.

**BAHRAIN WATCH**

### Bahrain Watch

[bahrainwatch.org](http://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**  
**مصر**  
**SOLIDARITY**

### Egypt Solidarity

[egyptsolidarityinitiative.org](http://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.



# Saudi rulers are spreading the virus of sectarian hate

The Covid-19 pandemic has created another opportunity for the Saudi state to intensify attacks on the country's Shi'a minority, writes **Ameen Nemer**.

On 8 March 2020, the same day that Italy went into lockdown, the Saudi regime started to lockdown Qatif, a city in the Eastern province with a Shi'a Muslim majority.

Although lockdown was the right thing to do anywhere to stop spreading the virus, the previous history of discrimination against the Shi'a community in Saudi Arabia and the absence of the medical staff next to the security forces at the checkpoints raised concerns about the regime's motives.

Media platforms in Saudi Arabia have exploited the coronavirus pandemic and used it as an opportunity to attack Shi'a Muslims both locally and internationally by calling them "non-Muslims" and "enemies" recruited to kill Sunni Muslims.

Despite the fact there were some who opposed this rhetoric, it is clear that Saudi Arabia is also infected with the disease of sectarianism and the regime is the main source, spreading it through the education system, the media and other means.

The media in the first days were overwhelmed by hatred and just like Trump, ignored the technical term Covid-19 and called it the "Chinese virus". Saudi writers described those who travelled to Iran as "agents" who became infected "on purpose", claiming they are "terrorists" who should be put on "trial" (the judiciary in Saudi Arabia is just a joke anyway). This political exploitation of the pandemic turned the Shi'a community into a punching bag.

The majority of the infected cases are not from Qatif, however, and they did not come from Iran but from Egypt, Italy, Turkey and many other countries. However, arrivals from Turkey, a country which accused the Saudi regime of murdering dissident Jamal



Women from Qatif call for prisoner releases in a video statement circulated online Photo: Screengrab

Khashoggi, have not been attacked like arrivals from Iran, who are less infected, according to official statistics.

Moreover, Chinese people have not looked down on the people in Wuhan, where the outbreak began. Nor did the Southern Italians look down at their Northern fellows. It is another story in Saudi Arabia where people in Qatif were demonised.

## Saudi Arabia is also infected with the disease of sectarianism and the regime is the main source

Some in the Shi'a community are seeking shelter and protection from the regime which sponsors hatred towards them. Of course, in this game of social engineering, the Saudi regime must feel satisfied that it has achieved its goal. It has always been ready to scapegoat and accuse some of betrayal in order to silence them and make them more obedient and submissive.

Travel from Saudi Arabia to Iran is banned for political reasons, but some Shi'a Muslims - mostly older people - do visit Shi'a religious sites in Iraq and Syria.

This has been the case for years, but during the coronavirus crisis, Saudi regime has exploited it and politicised it. A video showed a group of women pilgrims from Saudi Arabia locked up in

Lebanon begging the Crown Prince to have mercy on them by allowing them to go back home.

Another video showed a group of women calling on him to release their children from prisons. He responded to the first but he played dead to the second and I assume he will not consider stopping the war on Yemen.

Beyond attacking the Shi'a community, the pandemic has provided a chance for the regime to legitimise itself in front of the population by spreading the propaganda about what it is doing to tackle the virus.

Yet, this an unelected regime which has ruled by the sword since 1932 and thus has no choice but to protect people as it controls all the country's resources. Any failure to do so would count against the regime more than anyone else.

By 28 March 2020, there were 1203 registered cases of Covid-19 in Saudi Arabia. However there are an estimated 5000 unregistered cases. The shortage of medical staff will soon be clear.

May people stay safe everywhere, especially the most vulnerable. May the infected recover soon and my thoughts go out to the families who have lost their loved ones.

