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Campaigning to stop the dictator’s visit to Britain • Relatives of Egyptian political prisoners speak out
Middle East Solidarity is backed by events in the Middle East often dominate the news, but it is the stories of war, sectarian violence and western military intervention which grab the headlines.

Middle East Solidarity shows a different side to the region. We report on resistance to repression and imperialism from Morocco to Yemen, covering the strikes and protests which are missed by the mainstream media.

We hope to carry the voices and stories of the women and men who are still fighting for bread, freedom and social justice to new audiences. Our practical guides to campaigning and resources for activists aim to build a stronger solidarity movement.

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

You can find out more about our campaigns online here: www.menasolidaritynetwork.com www.egyptsolidarityinitiative.org www.bahrainwatch.org

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I was surprised when the Egyptian National Council for Human Rights announced the results of their tour of a number of Egyptian prisons. What really raised my anger and disgust at those who call themselves human rights defenders, is the amount of lying and fabrication in their claims.

For example, Mr. Mohamed Fayek, the president of the National Council and the lawyer Hafez Abu Seda, claimed that during their visit to Damanhour Prison, Mahienour was not there. The truth is that Mahienour was there and no-one asked her to meet the members of the council.

Mahienour informed us of everything the council ignored. She wants everyone outside to know, but everyone who had left the prison for a hearing. The delegation is conducting an investigation about this incident.

She also told us about the humiliating body searches after returning from court hearings. Women, many of whom are old and in prison because of debts, are forced to spend a whole night in a small room containing everyone who had left the prison for a hearing.

They are searched by being stripped naked by the prison wardens and have to wait until the following day, relieving themselves in front of the wardens. If they refuse, they spend another night this way.

There is no specific time for checking on prisoners and opening and closing the cells. On normal days the cells are locked at 2.30 pm which is not enough time to prepare food because of the continual water and electricity cuts. After a lot of effort and negotiations the cells are now locked at 4 pm.

She talked to us about the days prisoners spend screaming to draw attention to a sick woman or a woman in labour. One of the prisoners gave birth inside the cell because they were one and a half hours late in opening it.

The length of time for visits depends on the mood of the administration. Sometimes it is 15 minutes and other times it is half an hour and again at other times it is 45 minutes while the statute of the prison says that the legal duration of the visit is 60 minutes.

Mahienour would have told them about the women prisoners who were waiting for the National Council for Human Rights delegation in good faith because the state promised that there will be no one imprisoned in Egypt for debt by the end of the year. But the delegation did not come to hear them.

Instead they conducted a token visit as a cover-up for the Interior Ministry and left claiming that Mahienour was not there. Mahienour was there. She lives between the prison’s four walls but will continue to answer their lies, whatever it may cost her, just as she always has done.

This is an edited excerpt from a statement published on Maysoon el-Masri’s Facebook page on 31 August, translated by the FreeMahienour campaign. Read more about the campaign in solidarity with Mahienour and other political prisoners in Egypt on page 23.

Ibrahim was the last person I would ever thought would be arrested. He was never involved in politics. He would protest about Palestine but he differentiates between politics and protests to support humans.

“Ibis cell-mate, Peter Greste called him a ‘character’. He is so human, very kind and gentle. I don’t understand why people would ask why he was there in the first place? I would like to remind people he was trying to be a human with humanity.”

Ibrahim’s family are asking supporters to help their campaign by writing to the Egyptian Embassy in Ireland, mobilising support through student unions and community groups and taking part in their social media campaigns.

Go to ‘FreeMahienourHalawa’ on Facebook or free-Ibrahim.com for the latest news from the campaign.

You can also send a message of support directly to the family through the website.
Prison’s revolving door
Luke G.G. Bhatia

During the last few months the Bahraini authorities seem to have been operating a revolving door policy in the country’s prisons, intermittently releasing and re-arresting leaders and prominent members of the opposition. On 16 June 2015, Sheikh Ali Salman, the leader of Bahrain’s largest opposition group, al-Wefaq, was sentenced to four years in prison.

He was convicted of “inciting disobedience and hatred” on the small island state, a staunch ally of the UK and US governments. The arrest and sentencing of Sheikh Ali Salman caused widespread outrage in Bahrain and even drew criticism from its Western allies.

He was the last remaining opposition leader not languishing in jail. Protests took to the streets demanding his release. Three days later, on 19 June, another opposition leader, Ebrahim Sharif, secretary general of the National Democratic Action Society or Waad, was released 9 months before completing his 5-year sentence, handed down by the Bahraini government.

On 28 June, Fadhel Abbas, the Secretary-General of the Al-Wahdaawi Opposition Society, was sentenced to five years in prison for “spreading false information that could harm the military operations of Bahrain and its allies, in Yemen.”

Just three days later, the Bahrain government arrested senior al-Wefaq member Majeed alMadi, after he made a speech demanding fair electoral districts, a democratic state and self-determination for the people of Bahrain.

Nabeel Rajab, a prominent human rights defender in Bahrain and director of the Bahrain Centre for Human Rights, was pardoned by the King of Bahrain and released from prison 2 days later, on 13 July.

This followed pressure from the US and UK governments and an emergency resolution adopted by the European Parliament on 9 July. He had been imprisoned for comments made on Twitter, and charged with “offending national institutions.”

King Hamad al-Khalifa, head of the Bahrain ruling family, cited “health concerns” for his pardon. Another prominent member of opposition group al-Wefaq and former MP Sheikh Hasaan Isa, was arrested upon returning to Bahrain from a holiday with his family on 16 July. According to al-Wefaq, he was held for 48 hours without charge and interrogated without the presence of a lawyer.

The Ministry of Interior released a statement saying that a lawmaker had been arrested “on charges related to financing terrorism among terrorist fugitives and others who are associated in terrorist acts.”

On 24 August, Ibrahim Sharif found himself in court once again, a mere two months after being released from his 4-year stay in prison. He pleaded not guilty in court to charges of “promoting political change through forceful means.”

The court case is ongoing. During this bizarre circle of events the US government announced that it would be lifting a ban on the transfer of arms to Bahrain. The ban on arms sales from the US had been in place since the uprising of 2011 was put down using lethal force.

The severe counter-revolutionary repression that followed resulted in the deaths of more than one hundred people, and thousands imprisoned. The message that this sends to the Bahraini government is that it may operate with impunity and without fear of jeopardising its relationship with the UK and US.

Sharif is often cited as an example of the non-sectarian struggle in Bahrain, being the leader of the secular political opposition group Waad. His speech affirmed the national character of the opposition’s demands, contrary to the sectarian narrative which has been pushed by the state since 2011.

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Civil servants protest threat to jobs
Mostafa Bassiony

A campaign of protests and strikes by public employees gathered momentum in August as civil servants mobilised against a new law which threatens the job security of millions across the public sector.

On 10 August up to 5,000 civil servants working in the departments of General Taxation, Sales Taxation, Customs, the Ministry of Finance and Property Taxation rallied outside the Journalists’ Union headquarters in central Cairo.

They were joined by bus workers from some Public Transport Authority garages who took strike action on the same day, also in protest at the law.

After several generations where the public sector provided workers with a basic level of job security, Egypt’s 6.5 million public sector workers are facing an earthquake.

In the past although working conditions were poor and their wages low, public sector jobs were at least secure.

All that is now under threat as Egypt attempts to meet conditions for international loans and investment through adopting austerity measures.

The independent unions played an important role inorganising the protest.

Relations between the independent union and the regime have been complex since the overthrow of Mohamed Morsi in July 2013.

After Al-Sisi took power and launched his “War on Terror” leaders of many independent unions backed the new regime.

Their support for Al-Sisi’s call for an end to strikes created a crisis with their own rank-and-file, however.

Independent unions with a large, active membership continued to be involved in strikes and protests organised at a local level, despite national leaders’ pledge not to strike. Security forces have broken up large numbers of workers’ protests and arrested many activists.

The scale of the mobilisation on 10 August appears to have caught the security forces by surprise and they did not intervene to ban or break up the protest.

The demonstration is the largest rally organised by workers for two years.

It was also well-organised, with delegations joining the Cairo rally from Alexandria, the Canal Zone cities, Daqshiqiya province, Fayoum and Bani Souef. Activists toured the provinces beforehand, organising mobilising meetings.

The presence of the PTA bus workers boosted the protests. The independent union in the PTA is also strong and well-rooted.

The scale of resistance to the civil service law, and the response of the authorities, will be carefully watched by workers in other sectors.

Successful protests are likely to encourage others to follow suit, despite the scale of repression over the past year.

Teachers’ unions face attack
Mary Compton

Teachers Solidarity website interviews the leader of the Independent School Teachers’ Trade Union (ISTT) about the challenges facing the independent trade union movement in Egypt.

“Since Al-Sisi took power after the uprising in 2013, there has not even been a parliament. But people are alive in 2015. I can only hope for democracy by the end of the year.”

This is an edited version of an interview first published on Teachers Solidarity.com on 28 August.
Iraq

‘ISIS is born from your corruption’
Joseph Daher

Since the end of July, massive popular demonstrations have taken place in the Iraqi capital Baghdad and several cities in the south of the country, denouncing corruption in the country and the political bankruptcy of the ruling sectarian political parties. The demonstrations also condemned the continuing power outages, deteriorating public services and increasing social inequality.

In Baghdad, protesters held up placards saying that the regime’s corruption was responsible for the rise of ISIS. They denounced the parliament, which is held up placards saying that inequality. Yet, the demonstrators, for the most part made up of youth and with a substantial female presence, have raised slogans and demands challenging Iraq’s sectarian political system as a whole.

Across the country protesters called for a secular state in opposition to a sectarian state, chanted against the division between Sunni and Shia’s populations and for women’s rights and equality, while clear condemnations of sectarian political parties could be heard everywhere.

Protesters particularly targeted former Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, whose eight years in office were marred by allegations of corruption, authoritarianism and alienation of the Sunni population and who is still influential in the Iraqi regime.

Militia groups linked to the former Prime Minister and the Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI) attacked protesters with knives in the cities such as Baghdad and Kerbala, while the local security forces looked on. More than 30 protesters were wounded in Baghdad and dozens in Kerbala.

A large crowd in the city of Kerbala, a highly symbolic Shia’s location, condemned Iranian intervention in the internal affairs of the country by singing “Karbala is free, Tehran out! Out!” after Shia’s sectarian militia groups and Shia’s clergymen chanted slogans glorifying the Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei.

This massive popular movement has also been accompanied by strikes in some sectors, particularly energy and industry, opposing privatization and for better working conditions.

The Iraqi government led by Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi reacted to these protesters by voting through new laws against corruption.

Al-Abadi also suppressed important political positions (notably of three deputy prime ministers and three vice-presidents, including Nouri al-Maliki) and cancelled the privileges of ministers and deputies in an effort to halt the movement.

Sceptics can point to the poor legacy of dictatorships in general, and Egyptian dictatorships in particular, such as the military order which cut the project duration from three years to one year, and the statement by the head of the Suez Canal Authority to Al-Ahram newspaper that on completion the project would generate $100 billion for the Egyptian economy annually.

Crucially, the government has not made it clear how the two lanes of ship traffic in the Canal will work after the completion of the new channel.

Opinions are strongly divided about the project to dig a second channel for the Suez Canal. It is not clear where the enthusiasts for the project have found their confidence in its success, given the lack of any public feasibility study by the government or detailed reports on its goals.

The doubts of the sceptics are logical, especially considering the number of government projects which so far produced no results whatsoever, including the announcement of a device to treat AIDS, HIV and Hepatitis C, a project to build a million units of housing, and a project to create a new capital city.

Sceptics can point to the poor legacy of dictatorships in general, and Egyptian dictatorships in particular, in the construction of such “historic achievements.”

There is no dictator without a project of this kind adorning the background in the murals bearing his picture.

Anyone interested in the project suffers from the difficulty in obtaining reliable information on the nature of the project and its real goals.

Adding to the uncertainty, officials have made conflicting statements, such as the military order which cut the project duration from three years to one year, and the statement by the head of the Suez Canal Authority to Al-Ahram newspaper that on completion the project would generate $100 billion for the Egyptian economy annually.

A new Suez Canal channel opened on 6 August to great fanfare in the Egyptian and world media. An industrial corridor alongside the canal will create jobs and revitalise the region, supporters of the project say.

Egyptians shouldn’t be fooled by these illusions, argues Mostafa Omran. The real beneficiaries will be global firms and foreign investors, not ordinary people.

The new Suez Canal: Egypt’s gift to investors
Mostafa Omran challenges claims that the new Suez Canal project will be a lifeline for Egypt’s economy
a daily basis, whereas thanks to the opening of the new channel, this will increase to 97 ships per day.

However, according to the Suez Canal Authority website, 59 ships passed through the Canal on a daily basis in 2008, which was one of the busiest years for shipping before the global economic crisis hit.

Clearly, the increase or decrease in the number of ships reflects growth or recession in world trade.

The laws strip Egyptian workers of their most important rights and offer them up on a plate for investors.

So Mamish’s expectations are based on world trade expanding to the point where the Suez Canal can capture twice the volume of traffic it absorbed in 2008.

And this is all in the context of competition between the Suez Canal, the Panama Canal and the North Sea shipping routes.

We cannot look at the project to dig the new Suez Canal, and plans to develop the Suez Canal corridor, in isolation from Sisi’s role in adding to isolation from Sisi’s role in adding to the urgent need to find real solutions for our problems.

Between August 2014, when the project was announced, and August 2015, when Sisi paraded through the channel past watching heads of state, the Suez Canal Authority oversaw 37 km of dry digging and 35 km of expansion to existing channels.

The aim is to facilitate two-way traffic through the 163 km waterway and to accommodate larger ships.

Egyptian officials claim that the new channel will boost overall Canal revenues to $13.5 billion by 2023, requiring growth of 10 percent a year.

Despite publishing a front-page promotional advertorial on the project, The Economist was sceptical of such a rosy projection.

The magazine noted that world seaborne shipping grew 37 percent between 2000 and 2013, and that the annual rate of growth for global merchandise trade was only 3.4 percent a year in the decade up to 2016.

Engineering experts also warn that the new channel may have been built too close to the original channel.

Groundwater is seeping into the building site, and has to be pumped out at the cost of $1m per day.

Surviving moral panics and state homophobia...

The brutal torture and murder of three gay men, executed by ISIS in Mosul, is just one example of the persecution of LGBT people in the Middle East.

In Egypt and Lebanon too, LGBT citizens are subject to harassment, imprisonment and public humiliation.

In these cases, their persecutors are not Islamists, but the military regime of Abdel fattah al-Sisi and the Lebanese police.

Alice Finden explores the complex and varied nature of the campaigns of homophobic repression in Egypt and Lebanon which have gathered pace in recent years.
directions of the government. Police are more violent than ever: they are using tracking techniques which they have secured previously in 2003 but on a larger scale.

Under al-Sisi's regime, the persecution of LGBT people through the police state and societal rejection of their identity has intensified. The increasing privatisation of public space and the increasing violence against LGBT people have both been driven by a pathological fear of the LGBT community.

The pro-regime media has played a key role in striking back at any visible ‘deviation’ from nationalist norms of gender and sexuality.

Women protestors arrested and forced to endure ‘virginity tests’ were detained because of the challenge they represented to the Egyptian notion of sexuality and gender upheld by the military government. In her article "Talking back: Masculinity and femininity in the bodyguard division", Makram Ebeid explains that the particular masculinity that accompanies the military nationalism of al-Sisi's regime uses a state gender division to highlight the enemies of the state.

The pro-regime media has a key role in stirring up anxiety about LGBT people, and psychological torture is intended to radicalise these individuals.

As per the article written by well-known journalist, blogger and activist Scott Long in his blog 'Bitter Truth', the crackdown has also prompted a shift in the way LGBT people use public space. The constant raids and arrests have become a form of public protest against the regime's anti-LGBT policies.

The Egyptian authorities do not hesitate to cross the borders of public and private in order to humiliate and criminalise LGBT citizens. Making LGBT identity known is not of use as a form of activism from the closet. According to Makarem, the crackdown has sharpened the divide between the government and its supporting media.

The Egyptian counter-revolution has not only focused on enforcing sexuality and gender conformity as a means to break down resistance. In 2011, blogger and activist Ali Abuznima described the Egyptian military as a “heterosexual bodyguard of a nsf war to defend the status quo in the context of divisions within the mass movement against the Morsi’s rule.”

This is not to claim that life under Morsi’s rule was perfect. Some Islamist activists fuelled sectarian hatred by throwing stones at Christian churches; they were encouraging attacks on Coptic Christians during the battle over the adoption of a new constitution. LGBT people were still subject to homophobia and persecution. However, Youssef sees this as a “lighter crackdown”, compared to repression under al-Sisi. "Everyone knew that Morsi was leading a government with a religious-orientation, so they did not have anything to prove. On the contrary, the Brotherhood tried to work on different fronts and towards Egyptian society, the fact that people already acknowledged their views on sexuality.

Despite this, the military managed to radicalise this group of people, who raided their apartments in the 6th October City. The pro-regime media is churning out propaganda to increase the visibility of al-Sisi’s various public enemies. Regime supporters are willing to go to great lengths to stir up public outcry and mobilisation. The current wave of arrests of Muslim Brotherhood and LGBT community are among the key targets.

Activist Scott Long revealed recently that the anti-LGBT attacks at the "Twist on the Bees" bar were set up in his name, putting him at risk of arrest and abuse as it claimed that he was calling on LGBT people to support the Brotherhood. The attacks by al-Sisi’s government on those who do not fit its idea of Egyptian national identity are taking place in the context of divisions within opposition camps and the left in general over how to respond to the counter-revolution.

The Egyptian army has also prompted the withdrawal of LGBT activist groups and individuals of non-conforming genders and sexualities into the private sphere. Protests take place online or in the form of ‘activism from the closet’. According to Makarem, the crackdown on all forms of activism and criticism has led many LGBT activists to escape the country or go into hiding.

By framing their opponents as soft, weak or feminine, the military regime creates a public outcry against its “despicable” enemies. In other words, Ebeid argues, "using gender as the backdrop, the state decides which lives are grievable and how to use them.”

While LGBT people's experience of sexuality in the Middle East is punitive, they have also found numerous ways of resistance and mobilisation. For example, the 27 men arrested in a hammam on 1 July, nine members of the Muslim Brotherhood and anyone in support of Morsi’s short spell in government have also been branded traitors to the Egyptian state.

On 1 July, nine members of the Muslim Brotherhood including two of Morsi's senior officials were convicted of "organising illegal protests" and sentenced to three years in prison. They were accused of "inciting violence against civilians" and " supporting terrorism".

The creation of a 'moral panic' around LGBT citizens is not an unprecedented move by the Egyptian state, however. Mubarak’s thirty year rule also saw consistent targeting of LGBT people and activist Aliaa el-Mahdy used her naked body as a way to deflate the conservatism of the regime.

The pro-regime media is more vicious than anything under his predecessor’s rule. Some of the first disagreements within the Egyptian LGBT community were over whether to support the Brotherhood or not.

Activists succeeded in winning acquittal on all charges brought against them in a rare instance of a court acquittal of those accused of ‘indecent acts’.

Under al-Sisi’s regime, the crackdown has prompted the media outlets to shift their focus from sexual harassment to more pressing issues like terrorism.

The Egyptian state has been inspired to tag the LGBT community as a threat to national security. The anti-LGBT crackdown under al-Sisi has not only been about the persecution of LGBT people, but also about the persecution of critical voices. The Muslim Brotherhood and other political opponents have been branded traitors to the Egyptian state.

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Global University Inc.

Despite the recession, the international business of Higher Education still seems to be booming. Luke G.G. Bhattacharyya and Anne Alexander ask if UK universities are putting lucrative research and teaching contracts before human rights and academic freedoms as they partner with repressive regimes and companies across the Middle East.

For several years now, the “internationalisation” of Higher Education in Europe and North America has occupied the minds of many senior managers in both prestigious, and not-so-prestigious universities. This can take the form of attracting high-fee-paying foreign students, opening new campuses in glamorous locations, and courting foreign private and government investment for research and teaching.

As universities are also entering into training contracts with authoritarian states from the region.

Feature | University Inc.
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Anne Alexander

Cornell's campus in Qatar | Photo: Joey Coleman

Last year the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC), sent a letter to 8 universities outlining the workers’ rights violations occurring in many of the host countries in the Middle East.

The universities included UCL, Georgetown University, Cornell University, HEC Paris, Carnegie Mellon University, Northwestern University, Virginia Commonwealth University and Texas A&M.

The ITUC brought to their attention the issues faced by the migrant workers in the regions, such as lower than expected wages, confiscation of passports, human trafficking for forced labour and inhumane living conditions.

In the case of NYU Abu Dhabi, one of the leading activists in the student and staff-led campaign opposing the university’s complicity with the abuse of workers in UAE, has himself been barred from travel to Abu Dhabi.

Professor Andrew Ross was stopped from boarding a plane to the UAE in March this year, where he planned to spend a week researching the conditions of migrant workers on NYU’s Saadiyat Island campus.

NYU’s spokesman John Beckman claimed in response that “our faculty and students have experienced zero infringements on their academic freedom” during the five years NYU has been operating in Abu Dhabi.

He evidently hadn’t tried to use Skype from the Abu Dhabi campus: NYU’s student newspaper reported in February that students and staff there found the UAE’s internet censorship regularly preventing them from using the service.

Matt Duffy taught media law at a national university in the UAE for two years before work permits for him and his wife were suddenly cancelled in 2012. He believes promises by the UAE authorities to respect academic freedoms are meaningless: “No professor at NYU Abu Dhabi can be sure that what he teaches on the campus would not lead to a sudden and irreversible expulsion. The pledge of “academic freedom” from NYU is essentially worthless because powerful figures can make arbitrary employment decisions with absolutely no recourse.”

While expatriate academics face travel bans and cancelled work visas, the consequences for UAE academics who speak out are far worse.

Nasser bin Ghaith was teaching economics at the UAE-Sorbonne University when he was arrested in 2011. Held for seven months in appalling conditions, bin Ghaith was eventually convicted of “publicly insulting” the Crown Prince because he advocated democratic reforms.

His employer has close ties to Paris-Sorbonne, which receives 15 percent of student fees from enrolments in the UAE. In August 2012 Bin Ghaith disappeared after being arrested again, leaving his family fearful that he was being tortured in order to force a false confession.

Despite these high-profile cases, UK universities are continuing to form partnerships with the Gulf regime.

Take the Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland (RCSI). Since 2004 the institution has had a partnership with the Medical University of Bahrain.

After the uprising in Bahrain in 2011, some of the medics trained by the RCSI – Bahrain partnership were arrested and tortured for their role in treating protesters injured by government forces.

Students at RCSI – Bahrain were asked to swear an oath of allegiance to the ruling family and sign a document stating that they would not take part in protests.

On returning to Ireland after a fact-finding mission to Bahrain in 2011, Professor Eoin O’Brien urged the RCSI to speak up against the imprisonment of RCSI-Bahrain students and other Bahraini medical staff.

The RCSI’s President and Vice-President refused to accept his advice, he later told the BBC, instead telling him to tone down criticism of the Bahraini regime as it was damaging the RCSI’s reputation. More than four years after the uprising, and with some medics still in prison, the RCSI – Bahrain admissions are open for the September 2015 semester.

Staff and students at Manchester Metropolitan University (MMU) were dismayed to find out in 2014 that the university had signed a training contract with the Qatari Police Force, for the country’s new Police College.

Activists from the lecturers’ union UCU at MMU noted the hypocrisy of the university promoting LGBT equality whilst at the same time signing a contract with the police force of a country where male homosexuality is illegal, and punishments include flogging, imprisonment, deportation and death.

Pura Ariza is branch secretary of the UCU union at MMU. “Our UCU branch was appalled with MMU’s decision to collaborate with the police,” she told Middle East Solidarity. “Members insisted that they had the right not to work with enforcers of human rights abuses.”

Pura and her colleagues were also worried by the change in the university’s role: from public provider of teaching and scholarship to private contractor for a repressive regime.

Only a few years before signing the training agreement with the Qatari Police Force, MMU’s department offering teaching in Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies had closed down.

“Students used to come from all sorts of backgrounds, including local services and the police,” notes Pura. “Now they come from government PREVENT policies to tackle extremism, we are told to spy on local Muslim students, whose hopes of an education have ended or have even arrived.”

Connections between Egyptian and British universities also mean that students in Egypt may be barred from certain programs. British universities have concentrated on accreditation degrees at Egyptian private universities, while a new £20 million research fund provided
by the two governments is likely to spur research collaborations and partnerships in future.

Loughborough University, Queen Mary University London and London South Bank University validate degrees for the British University in Egypt (BUE), while the degrees at October University for Modern Sciences and Arts (MSA) are validated by Bedfordshire and Greenwich Universities.

Three members of MSA staff, including the dean of the Faculty of Pharmacy, were reportedly arrested in the crackdown following the military coup of July 2013.

Severe repression affects the whole of the Egyptian higher education system, according to a new report by Egyptian human rights organisation, the Association for Freedom of Thought and Expression (AFTE).

Last academic year, security forces arrested students from their accommodation in dawn raids and repeatedly stormed campuses in attempt to stop students and opponents to the current military regime.

Three students were killed on or near campus and 761 arrested. During the last academic year 849 students faced trial in front of military courts, on the grounds that university campuses constitute a “military area,” under the jurisdiction of the military.

Meanwhile pressure on university staff increased as university leaders used disciplinary sanctions and threats to enforce conformity to the government’s line.

The government frequently intervened directly in the appointment of professors, and in university disciplinary processes, according to AFTE’s research.

In Egypt’s public universities, senior academic and management roles have long been the almost exclusive preserve of senior academics and managers, and intervened directly in the appointment of university leaders.

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Israel regularly prevents Palestinian footballers from playing in international and local matches, and jailed Mahmoud Sarsak, a member of the Palestinian national team for three years without charge or trial.

Sarsak, who was tortured in prison, believes he was deliberately targeted for arrest as a well-known football player. Meanwhile teams based in Israeli settlements play in the Israeli league and can travel abroad without difficulty.

Nabil, like 3.34 million Syrians, is – in the eyes of the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) – a refugee. Like the others, he has been forced into exile for fear of persecution.

Behind this terrible motive which all share, each one has their own reasons, more personal and subtle, that international law does not always take into account. And which Europeans are only rarely able to understand.

When it comes to Syria, they generally hear only about the supporters of the regime, described as cynical or bloodthirsty, about its moderate opponents, usually powerless, or about the jihadi fighters, depicted as horrible, medieval barbarians.

And once they reach the gates of Europe, the Syrians fleeing the war find themselves all lumped together as migrants, most often illegal ones.

At the age of 33, like so many others, Nabil fled Syria to escape from arbitrary arrest, from the torture that would follow, from a sudden bombardment or a stray bullet.

His name is on a list of 96,000 Syrians hunted by Syrian intelligence, the existence of which was revealed by a leak in March 2013.

His greatest enemy is the indifference of the European Union to the asylum-seekers who are trying to reach its shores.

For in order to benefit from the rights granted to refugees according to the Geneva Convention and many European laws, it is still necessary to submit a request for asylum.

Put off indefinitely by the European embassies in Lebanon, threatened by the random violence directed at
Syrian refugees speak out

Mohammed lives in Manchester. When I ask him why he left Syria he simply says, “because of the situation.” His journey to Europe has taken him over a year. He left Syria on 7 June 2014.

He was a teacher working in a school outside of Aleppo. He was stopped by the security forces of Assad’s regime. Mohammed continued to teach without pay at the school for one year before deciding to leave Syria.

I ask him to explain to me his journey to the UK.

Once in France Mohammed started to make his way north, first to Paris, and then to Calais, at one point travelling 250km “underneath a truck and across the fields.”

When asked about the situation in Syria now he says: “Because of the violence, the war has nothing to do with corruption.”

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I ask him about the journey to the UK. He tells me that he lived in the countryside near Aleppo, near Khaliloco. The area is a revolutionary stronghold that is bombarded by Assad’s government’s bombs on a daily basis.

He crossed the border with Turkey in the north of Syria and spent fourteen days waiting to travel to Libya, explaining that: “Libya is the best place to reach Europe, but the journey is hard and your life is crossing danger.” Mohammed bought a ticket off his friends so that he was able to purchase a plane ticket from Libya to Turkey.

Once in Turkey Mohammed had been required to pay all his money having been spent on the plane ticket there, he had to work in order to save the €700 that it costs to travel across the Mediterranean.

He spent three and a half months in Libya working in a marble stone factory, saving his wages until he could afford to make the crossing.

I am planning when I get my travel documents, to go back and thank them all because I know most of them.”

On the final leg of his journey to the UK, he explains, “it is very difficult to cross to England. You either pay for a smuggler to help you or you have to depend on yourself if you don’t have money.”

“If you don’t have money and depend on yourself it is just depends on your luck. Crossing depends on luck. I did everything, more than you can imagine to cross. 250km under a truck. Every day I tried but I didn’t succeed. I got caught and detained. Some guys come, they know nothing, and after one day they cross.”

Mohammed spent four months and three days in Calais eventually managing to sneak into the port, and hiding again underneath a lorry amongst the wheels. He says, “when the truck moved and went inside the ship it was like, you know there are special sounds that the trucks make when they go, very deep music, so we were very happy when it stopped and we were on the ship.”

After arriving in the UK the truck was stopped by the police and the people took Mohammed away to a detention centre.

After staying in hostels he eventually found work as a builder in Sheffield, and upon being granted asylum by the UK government he travelled and settled in Manchester. At the time I spoke to Mohammed about what could be done to help end the misery for people in Calais, solidarity and protests were not yet having an impact.

He said that refugees were worried that their calls for help were not being heard. “We had some demonstrations in Calais about the conditions but nobody cared, nobody answered us. They have to be able to depend on themselves to be more independent.”

Now that demonstrations in solidarity with refugees are mobilising tens of thousands, hopefully the voices of those still trying to find their way to shore will no longer be ignored.

Corbyn, McDonnell and trade union leaders slam invitation Egypt Solidarity

Opposition MPs are calling on David Cameron to withdraw the official invitation to Al-Sisi. Green Party MP Caroline Lucas tabled Early Day Motion 279 condemning the visit with the backing of Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn and Shadow Chancellor John McDonnell, Mark Durkan of the Social Democratic and Labour Party, the Scottish National Party’s Martyn Day and Jonathan Edwards of Plaid Cymru.

Over 30 MPs had signed the EDM by the time of the parliamentary summer recess in late July.

The motion also calls for the revocation of death sentences handed out by Egyptian courts to opponents of the military regime, including former president Mohamed Morsi, who was overthrown by al-Sisi in a coup two years ago, and demands an end to British sales of arms and security equipment to Egypt.

John McDonnell MP, one of the sponsors of the motion and a member of the MENA Solidarity Steering Group said:

"This is a visit of someone with a record of oppression of human rights and of trade union rights. We shouldn’t allow him to come to our country and desecrate our soil"

Meanwhile, trade union leaders Mark Serwotka and Dave Ward confirmed their backing for the campaign.

Mark Serwotka, general secretary of the civil servants union PCS, and Dave Ward, general secretary of the Communication Workers’ Union CWU, are among the unions supporting the motion.

They join leading figures from the XM 24 squat organised an event to support the protest outside the Egyptian embassy.

The return of Mahienour and her colleagues to jail sparked protests around the world to mobilise pressure in solidarity with Egyptian political prisoners on 20 and 21 June.

The date marks a year since a peaceful protest march to the presidential palace in Cairo was attacked by the police and over twenty people arrested, including human rights activist Yara Sallam and student Sanaa Seif.

Egypt solidarity activists staged a demonstration on 20 June at Cleopatra’s Needle in London before joining a major protest organised by the People’s Assembly Against Austerity.

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A UK court approved Bahraini Isa Al-Aali’s asylum appeal in a verdict welcomed by the Bahrain Institute for Rights and Democracy (BIRD). Judge Clark of the Immigration and Asylum First-tier Tribunal ruled on 28 July that there is “reasonable chance that the appellant [Al-Aali] would risk persecution on return to Bahrain for his political beliefs” and that he therefore qualifies as a refugee.

Isa Al-Aali, 21, arrived in Britain on 14 February 2014, when he fled Bahrain via Dubai to London on a visit visa. Al-Aali had been a participant in protests in Bahrain. In February 2013 police arrested him, beat him on the way to his house with their batons, threatened to cut him if he did not confess to attacking policemen.

Al-Aali was imprisoned two more times in relation to his assembly and association in 2013. On his release on bail in January 2014, he decided to flee the country. In May 2014, the Home Office ordered Al-Aali’s deportation, which was later stopped by a court injunction. At the time, Al-Aali told the Independent that “the decision by the UK to deport me to Bahrain could put me at risk of my life as I will get tortured.” The Home Office’s denial of Isa Al-Aali’s asylum coincided with controversies over the UK welcoming Bahraini Prince Nasser bin Hamad, who faces allegations of torture.

In October 2014, Prince Nasser’s immunity from prosecution of torture in the UK was quashed, though he continues to visit the country. Following the court’s verdict, Isa Al-Ali said: “This decision is a slap in the face of the Bahraini government. I will be an ambassador to my country and people, and continue the struggle for human rights and democracy.”

A teachers’ leader denied medical care MENA Solidarity

The health of jailed teachers’ union leader Mahdi Abu Dheeb is failing, Bahrain and international human rights groups warned recently.

Injuries sustained under torture during his interrogation in 2011 mean that he is unable to walk without support because of severe neck and back pain. The Bahraini authorities have also denied him access to medicine for hypertension and diabetes since March, according to Amnesty International, and refused to let him wear supportive shoes needed for his back pain.

Prison guards have refused to accept the medication brought to him by his family. Amnesty is calling for immediate medical treatment for Abu Dheeb and an investigation into allegations of torture that he endured throughout his interrogation.

 Fellow members of the Bahrain Teachers’ Association, Jalila Salman, was also arrested on the same charges as Abu Dheeb in 2011, but was released after 6 months of imprisonment. Salman was quoted on twitter by BirdBahrain saying: “Everyone tortured Mahdi Abu Dheeb, the CID, prison, military court, even the nurse.”

Meanwhile, fellow political prisoner, Dr. Abduljalil al-Singace completed his 160th day of hunger strike on 28 August.

Like Abu Dheeb, Al-Singace was arrested for his role in peaceful protests in 2011. He was sentenced to life imprisonment by a military court on 22 June 2011, as a member of the “Bahrain 13”, a group of prominent human rights and political activists.

Dr Al-Singace is a blogger and academic and former head of Mechanical Engineering at the University of Bahrain. For campaigns for his release and an appeal signed by 41 NGOs have highlighted his physical deterioration; entering prison as a disabled man, a lack of access to medical aid has only worsened his condition.

In March 2015 he began a hunger strike in protest at torture and collective punishment in Bahrain’s prisons, surviving by drinking water, fizzy drinks and taking IV injections.

Activists deliver Calais solidarity Alice Finden

Refugees trapped at the border and started spreading the word about how others could do the same. Provisions are being collected from workplaces, communities and union branches and then driven down to refugee camps on the border.

Stand Up To Racism is organising a delegation to Calais on 17 October. Response to the activism from people in the UK has been impressive. On fundraising, Diane Fortheringham of the group Glasgow Solidarity with Calais said “The initial target was £500, and with two days to go before the appeal finishes almost £4,000 has been donated.”

Other groups around the UK and France such as No Borders UK, SOAS detainee support, and L’aberge des Migrants are taking action in the form of fundraisers and providing direct aid in Calais.

As Fortheringham states: “It is clear that the mainstream media is not the voice of many ordinary people.”

Read the stories of Syrian refugees Nabil and Mohammad on p19-21. Go to the Stand Up To Racism website for more details on the statement and solidarity delegations.
Academics & students under fire

WHAT YOU CAN DO

Make a protest
Write a letter to the relevant embassy in London, calling for the release of all those unjustly detained.
Make it specific: it is important that the regimes know that individual prisoners have not been forgotten.
Look out for information online about dates for trials and appeal hearings to time your action.

Make it public
Don’t just let the ambassador know you’re angry, tell the world.
Write to the media, spread the word on social media, or ask your student union or trade union to circulate your letter.
Embassy officials read and respond to letters in the national press. They care about their image abroad

Do it together
Collective action is stronger than a lone voice.
Why not organise a joint letter and collect signatures from workmates or other students?
Put a resolution to your union branch or student union to send an official protest.
Organise or join a protest to highlight specific cases of repression. Go to www.menasolidaritynetwork.com/campaignguide

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Festering piles of rubbish in the streets of Beirut this summer touched off mass anti-government protests on a scale not seen for several years. Lebanese activist Haytham Cero analyses the political and social tensions which turned waste collection into a major political crisis.

Over the summer the Lebanese capital Beirut was the scene of a growing protest movement triggered by a crisis over rubbish collection. A major landfill site closed down in July and the corrupt political and business clique that runs the country failed to find a replacement. As a result tons of rubbish were left for weeks on the streets of Beirut and other cities throughout the country.

This issue is the latest scandal of a regime in perpetual crisis. Privatisation, neoliberal policies and gentrification over the years have marginalised the majority of the Lebanese population.

The regime constantly uses religious sectarian rhetoric as the cornerstone of a divide-and-rule strategy, threatening to plunge the country into a repeat of the 1975-1990 civil war.

The state is divided among sectarian parties and their militias who in turn are supposed to control and contain “their” people, so the organised looting of the country’s resources by the regime’s crony capitalists can continue undisturbed.

This is the backdrop for the emergence of the “You Stink” movement, which organised a 10,000 strong protest in central Beirut on 22 August.

Although its organisers and initial participants were mainly middle class, mobilised through social media, it was able to draw on the resentment felt by large layers of Lebanese society towards corrupt politicians.

On 22 August, protesters’ attempt to remove the barbed wire set up by the police and army was met with fierce repression by state security forces.

Riot police fired live bullets into the air and attacked protesters with tear gas and water cannons, injuring dozens in a savage assault.

The “You Stink” movement organisers – along with large sections of the mainstream media – condemned state violence against protesters, and called for another demonstration the next day.

However, when youth from the impoverished Beirut suburbs spontaneously joined the protests the “You Stink” campaign organisers and mainstream media labelled them “infiltrators” under the pretence that they came from neighbourhoods notoriously controlled by sectarian parties Amal and Hezbollah.

A well known TV reporter said they “didn’t look like educated activists to me”. The organisers went so far as to call off the protest and ask security forces to “clear the square of infiltrators.”

A further protest on 29 August mobilised tens of thousands, but the same tensions were still visible.

The seemingly festive atmosphere was disturbed by a few thousands chanting revolutionary slogans against the regime, and putting social demands at the forefront of the march.

The organisers and the mainstream parties which had jumped on the protest bandwagon appealed to Lebanese nationalism, but revolutionary activists raised chants inspired by the Arab revolutions of 2011.

A few weeks later, further protests appeared to have won a victory, as the government conceded activists’ demands to let local councils remove the rubbish as well as opening new landfill sites.

Initially confined to rubbish collection and environmental issues, mass mobilisation around the “You Stink” movement has created an important space to express political demands, and uncovered the discontent felt by large layers of the population.

The organisers’ efforts to limit the social scope of the movement and their hostility towards the young people from poor and working-class neighbourhoods who tried to participate was a serious mistake.

The fact that people from Beirut’s poorest neighbourhoods joined the protests from 23 August onwards shows the potential for breaking the ruling sectarian parties’ grip on political life.

It raises the possibility of mobilising people along class lines to fight for social demands, rather than through religious sectarianism.