Made in Europe: the arsenal of al-Sisi’s security state

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Return to Baghdad
Life is a polluted grind for millions of Iraqis, but corruption is sparking new protests.

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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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About us

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Iraq: the legacy of occupation

Tens of thousands of protestors were camped outside Baghdad’s fortified Green Zone in February and March, home to government ministries, the parliament, and foreign embassies. They blocked the main entrance and demanded an end to the corruption and sectarianism in Iraqi politics, a legacy of the Anglo-American invasion and occupation thirteen years ago.

Secular protestors were already making these demands in Tahrir Square, a few hundred metres away from Iraq’s parliament, across the Jumhuriya bridge. They were joined, and outnumbered, by the Sadrist, led by Muqtada Al-Sadr.

Muqtada gave a speech in Tahrir Square in late February, denouncing corruption and sectarianism. He called for a new technocratic government composed of ministers unaffiliated to any political party. Terrorists’ bombs killed dozens in a Sadr City market a few days later.

The Sadrist, who can mobilise hundreds of thousands of men, women, and children from their militia, joined the protest camps outside the Green Zone. There was a thriving protest camp at the entry point to the walled-off government zone. Sadrists mixed with the secular progressives; they were sharing food and protecting them. Had the secular protestors been alone, security forces would have probably succeeded in dispersing them.

They were gradually joined by protestors from other parts of Iraq. They used their smartphones to spread footage of protest on social media. They proudly showed the diversity of the camp: of secular and religious Iraqis protesting together, and Sunnis alongside Shia, and of their clerics praying together. They challenged the claims that it was an exclusively Shia protest camp.

The drainage system is so poorly maintained that ordinary winter rains cause flooding in the city. A restaurant owner explained that private contractors, paid by local government, tarmacked over the drains and manholes on his street, taking no notice of his remonstrations.

A wall of private contractors, who own the drainage-trucks, and who were sent by the local government, demanded payment from residents. Instead of paying the high fees each year for what should be a free service, he decided to conduct his own repair works privately. However, the other residents did not contribute to the cost, so he set up to only deal with his part of the road.

The lack of employment opportunities prompts men to use their private cars as unlicensed taxis. It is not yet socially acceptable for women to do the same. Independence mobility in Baghdad depends on private car ownership. Baghdadis say there are now more cars than people in the city. The frequent traffic jams give the impression this might be true. The basic task of moving around Baghdad is a polluted grind.

But it isn’t just the number of cars on the roads which cause congestion. In many neighbourhoods, concrete barriers still close off streets to limit access to roads where there are security checkpoints. Some of the barriers are waist high with small gaps to allow only pedestrian access. Others, like those enclosing Al Dora, are sealed and several metres high so that even pedestrian access is controlled.

Baghdadis still find barriers appearing in unexpected places, roads which may have been open just a month ago may be closed off today. It can be infuriating. Even during the course of a journey, the contours of the city can change in obstructive ways. Endemic corruption is a major source of popular resentment at the political class. Political connections to a religious party are needed to access salaried public sector jobs as well as government scholarships for study abroad.

This corruption has also produced a major fiscal crisis. The cumulative total budget since 2003 is close to $950bn, averaging $67bn per year, and based almost entirely on oil and gas revenues. The 2016 budget is $99.6bn, optimistically based on a $45 per barrel oil price, with a $25/b barrel deficit. Plunging oil prices and corruption threaten to put the country in dire fiscal crisis.

Corrupt practices mean that there are still ghost employees. In one government, these are individuals who may not exist or do not show up to work, but to whom salaries are being paid. Billions of dollars of public funds are paid for projects which are not built. Despite this cash sloshing around, official unemployment is still above 16 percent, possibly even higher in reality.

People across Iraq are fed up. They are angry at the grand larceny committed over the years as they and their children struggle. The cost of living in Iraq has increased enormously since 2003 but economic prospects for most people have not. Many government employees have had their salaries cut.

Even in northern Iraq, where two Kurdish parties effectively run their own ‘statelettes’ there are similar problems. Infrastructure is in much better shape in areas of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), dominated by the Kurdish Democratic Party and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan. But without membership or a connection to one of these parties, it is extremely difficult to acquire a salaried public sector position. They are not even eligible as they used to be, as many government employees have not received their salaries for months.

Iraq’s Kurdistan was supposed to be the successful poster-story of the occupation but its residents who experienced severe persecution under Saddam’s regime, are still struggling. To its credit, the KRG has kept its doors open to the hundreds of thousands displaced by the war with ISIS in Iraq, and to refugees from Syria.

Thirteen years later, the country has not recovered from the legacy of the occupation. Iraq is paralysed from corruption and protracted wars which continue to displace and dispossess. The war with Daesh is another phenomenon whose numerous causes include the invasion of Iraq and the resultant communal politics of exclusion.

Ordinary Iraqis across the country are paying the price while their politicians and global arms manufacturers; accumulate vast profits. Those in the protest camp outside the Green Zone attempt to make the moment not one of defeat, but one of hope. They continue to protest on Fridays. If they are successful, then there is some hope of ending Iraq’s political paralysis and state of perpetual warfare. But this prospect is far from being imminent.

Many young Iraqis, especially men, have decided it is not worth waiting around for the positive outcomes of paternal change, and have decided to leave. Protests in Iraq have been under way since the Arab Spring began in 2011. In some areas protestors were killed by government forces, such as in Hawija where twenty people were killed by ‘gummen’, according to the government. Life is leaving so many young Iraqis behind.

As of 31 December 2015, over three million Iraqis are estimated to have been displaced internally. It is no wonder that Iraqis remain highly represented in global refugee statistics.

The war with Daesh will continue, resulting in more displacement. If there is no political solution and people’s calls for political reforms are ignored, violent expressions of discontent will continue.
Workers defy shipyard’s military bosses
Hisham Fouda

Workers at the Alexandria Shipyard Company in Egypt have been victimised and dragged before a military court for standing up for their rights at work, but a growing solidarity movement is putting the generals under pressure.

The Alexandria Shipyard Company was founded in 1960 to serve the Egyptian navy. In 2003, in the context of a wave of privatisations across Egypt, the shipyard was transferred from the public sector to become the property of the Ministry of Defence.

In 2015, General Abdel fattah al-Sisi, Egypt’s current president, announced works to develop the Shipyard.

His speech at the official celebrations demanded reduced costs, spurring workers into organising resistance against this attack on their earnings.

In May 2016, under pressure from worsening living conditions, workers’ representatives and members of the union committee attempted to negotiate with the management, after the workers’ allowances for the month of Ramadan were cut.

The military director of the Shipyard refused to meet them, barking out an order to leave his office immediately.

Angry workers began to gather on 23 May for a protest, raising demands such as raises to their monthly pay, back payment of profit-sharing bonuses which have been stopped for the last four years, improved health services and security. They also called for restarting production in areas which had been mothballed.

The persecution of the Shipyard workers has generated a wave of sympathy among workers in Egypt.

The director’s swift answer was to send the Shipyard’s 2,400-strong workforce home on one-third of their normal pay and to refer 26 workers to the military prosecutors who charged them with “incitement to strike” and “refraining from work”.

The trial breaches the Egyptian Constitution as it concerns the right to strike, which is guaranteed in international conventions which Egypt has signed.

Thirteen male and one female worker have appeared in court, while the rest of the 26 are on the run from the authorities.

The 14 who are detained have been kept in police cells since May, waiting for the judgement in their case, which has been postponed twice for no reason.

As military courts do not allow appeals, the only way to overturn the sentences would be to seek a presidential pardon. The judges could sentence the defendants to up to three years in prison.

Under pressure from the local and international solidarity campaign the Shipyard allowed 600 workers to return to work in August.

Immediately, an incident in one of the workshops exposed management’s deadly neglect of health and safety, when Mohammed Gad was killed by electrocution. The 27-year-old father of two and his colleagues had spent long years demanding safety boots and occupational health and safety, but their complaints were ignored.

The case against the 26 workers has to be understood in the context of a widespread attack on workers by the military regime as it pursues a plan of counter-revolution aimed at reversing the gains of the 2011 Revolution.

Terrorising workers into organising resistance against this attack on their rights at work, but a growing solidarity movement is putting the generals under pressure.

The Alexandria Shipyard Company in Egypt have been victimised and dragged before a military court for standing up for their rights at work, but a growing solidarity movement is putting the generals under pressure.

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On 8 September, the Italian and Egyptian investigative committees met again to discuss the developments in Giulio Regeni’s case. It was just over seven months since the body of the young Italian researcher from Cambridge University, was found lifeless in Cairo, with evident signs of torture.

There had been positive achievements such as the release of Ahmed Abdallah, Giulio’s family’s legal consulsor in Egypt, after 138 days in prison.

The Egyptian delegation also admitted that Giulio had been following the police before his disappearance, and finally shared phone records of the area in which Giulio was last seen, although they said it was not possible to provide CCTV footage of Giulio’s kidnapping.

Activists in Italy warned however, that such “small steps forward” could be used to push for the restoration of full diplomatic relations between Italy and Egypt, suspended since the withdrawal of Italy’s ambassador earlier this year.

Tina Marinari of Amnesty Italy told Middle East Solidarity, “the truth for Giulio, the truth that millions of Egyptians are demanding, has to pass through an efficient and serious collaboration of the Egyptian investigators with their Italian counterpart.” She added, “we hope that these few steps forward won’t be utilised by those who, in Italy and Egypt, are working for a rapid normalisation of relationships between the two countries.”

In the months following Giulio’s death, Amnesty International Italy started a campaign pressuring the Italian government to demand a clear and transparent investigation of the case.

“Italy hadn’t seen such a vast popular mobilisation on human rights in decades”

Italian civil society also put pressure on the government to go easy on the Al-Sisi regime.

The more the Italian delegation has investigated Giulio’s murder, the more has been learnt of the massive and shocking repression apparatus responsible for human rights violations and forced disappearances in Egypt.

According to Tina Marinari, Giulio’s case became “a way to make even more evident the systematic violation of human rights in Egypt, a country which is an important strategic ally for Western countries in the war on terrorism and often looked at as a key for the stability of the area.”

Sergio Bassoli from the Italian union federation CGIL told Middle East Solidarity, “Italy hadn’t seen such a vast popular mobilisation on human rights in decades: that’s why we often call Giulio a human rights activist. His case sheds light on the thousands currently detained, the hundreds tortured or disappeared under Al-Sisi’s regime.”

Diplomatic relations between Italy and Egypt were officially interrupted in April with the withdrawal of the Italian ambassador Massimo Massari from Cairo.

In July, the Italian parliament voted to suspend the selling of F-16 spare parts to Egypt. Although it was mainly a symbolic vote, it showed a first political commitment to the cause.

In late August, Giulio’s family and the Italian senator Luigi Manconi called on the government not to send the new ambassador to Cairo.

This move was in response to Al-Sisi’s declaration that diplomatic relations between the two countries were “perfectly good”.

Sending the ambassador back to Egypt would have signified the reconciliation of diplomatic relations, undermining the efforts undertaken to obtain concrete collaboration in the murder investigation from the Egyptian authorities.

Luigi Manconi told Middle East Solidarity: “The Italian government still shows a timid attitude towards its Egyptian counterpart.”

The other EU governments have taken an even softer line: whereas Italy withdrew its ambassador in April, the next move from France was to secure new economic deals with Egypt.

In the words of Riccardo Noury from Amnesty Italy, “if the EU had been united in its stance the case of Al-Sisi’s government, we would have seen 27 withdrawn ambassadors and not just one”.

Meanwhile, the results of an autopsy on Giulio’s body revealed the full extent of the tortures he suffered. His torturers appear to have carved letters into his body: in the words of Giulio’s mother, “they used him like a blackboard.”

See pp for more on how the EU and UK are building Al-Sisi’s security state.

Despite disappearing hundreds of people over the past year, Egypt’s security forces are still welcomed by governments across Europe as partners, Middle East Solidarity reveals.

They attend regular high-level meetings with the UK Home Office, use French ammunition and armoured cars, join training courses organised by the German Federal police and take part in expert seminars on counter-terrorism funded by the EU.

Three years on from the bloody crackdown which accompanied Al-Sisi’s seizure of power, the doors of government ministries and national police headquarters across Europe are still open to the men who run Egypt’s feared security apparatus, seen as vital partners in the “fight against terrorism and illegal migration”. Their military colleagues, meanwhile, remain valued customers of the Egyptian defence industry.

Yet there are also signs that campaigns to force governments to curb the flow of arms to Al-Sisi’s regime can win crucial victories, with Italy leading the way.

A massive public mobilisation to demand the truth about the murder of PhD student Giulio Regeni, widely believed to have been detained, tortured and killed by one of Egypt’s security services, pushed the Italian parliament to halt the supply of spare parts for F16 fighters in June this year.

Middle East Solidarity’s special investigation explores the European foundations of the Egyptian security order to force a “confession”.

The report provides damning evidence of the complicity of the judiciary in enforced disappearances and torture – this is not a case of a single agency ‘gone rogue’, but a systematic policy across several major foundations of the state, directed at the highest level.

The appointment of Magdy Abdel-Ghaffar as Minister of Interior in March 2015 has led to a “visible spike in the use of enforced disappearances”, says Amnesty.

Abdel-Ghaffar was previously a leading officer in both State Security Investigations (SSI), Mubarak’s notorious secret police, and its successor, the National Security Agency (sometimes referred to as National Security Sector, or Homeland Security).

The SNA was created in the immediate aftermath of the 2011 uprising, after protesters stormed SSI buildings to prevent officers removing evidence of the agency’s role in human rights violations.

Then Minister of Interior, Mansour al-Ebrashy disbanded the SSI and created the NSA. He later told a TV programme that the name change was simply a convenient fiction to “protect” SSI officers, and that the personnel of the agency remained virtually the same.

Amnesty concludes that the NSA is now playing the same role as the SSI did under Mubarak, with even more brutal consequences: “Since March 2015, the NSA has appeared to be the lead agency responsible for arrests, detaining and building criminal cases against political suspects, holding many in uncommunicado detention and culminating in enforced disappearances and torture.”

Egyptian state prosecutors are working hand-in-glove with the NSA,
The report says.
The NSA regularly falsifies dates of arrest to conceal enforced disappearances and presents the "confessions" extracted under torture which prosecutors then used as the basis for charges against detainees. Lawyers working with detainees and their families told Amnesty that 90 percent of those subjected to enforced disappearances emerged in custody to eventually face charges such as taking part in unauthorized protests or attacking members of the security forces.

Narratives of “counter-terrorism” are used to justify these abuses both to the Egyptian public and to foreign governments.

Yet new laws introduced since the 2013 military coup make virtually every form of criticism of the government a potential “terrorism” offence. In 2015, al-Sisi ushered in a law which defines terrorist acts as the “use of force or violence or threat or terrorizing” aiming to: “disrupt general order or endanger the safety, interests or security of society, harm individual liberties or rights; harm national unity, peace, security, the environment or buildings or other property which hinder public authorities, judicial bodies, government facilities, and others from carrying out all or part of their work and activity”.

“Force” and “threat” are often so vaguely defined by prosecutors that political critics whose work or activities which hinder public authorities could be defined as “terrorist acts”.

The catch-all charge of “membership of a terrorist organization” is frequently used against all critics of the regime, not only supporters of the now declared banned Muslim Brotherhood, which was designated a “terrorist group” in December 2013.

Germany

Extensive police cooperation and a multi-billion Euro arms contract for Siemens power generators underpin the relationship between Germany and Egypt.

“Egypt is an indispensable ally in the fight against terrorism and irregular migration,” noted German Interior Minister Thomas de Maizière in March 2016 during a visit to Cairo.

In July his Egyptian counterpart Magdy Abdel Ghaffar signed a wide-ranging security cooperation agreement with Germany during a visit to Berlin.

According to triumphant Egyptian press reports, the “positive results” expected include the mutual extradition of fugitives fleeing from justice, training for Egyptian police officers in Germany on a wide range of topics including fighting “electronic crimes”, cooperation in areas such as crimes against the person, or financial crimes, counterfeiting and money-laundering, terrorist financing, crimes against cultural and intellectual property, exchange of information especially around training in civil defence and security of travel documentation.

Ghaffar’s visit merely sets the seal on several years of behind-the-scenes cooperation between Egypt’s notorious National Security Agency and the German Federal Criminal Police Office (Bundeskriminalamt – BKA).

In May 2015, the German Interior Ministry gave a detailed response to parliamentary questions from German opposition party Die Linke about security cooperation with Egypt.

The document, seen by Middle East Solidarity, outlines a series of “expert seminars” and “information exchanges” around the theme of counter-terrorism following the invitation of Egyptians “explosives experts” to an international symposium organised by the BKA in November 2014.

The intractable civil war in Libya following the NATO intervention there in 2011 and the rise of armed groups claiming allegiance to ISIS has spurred the Italian government’s desire to collaborate with al-Sisi.

Italian Prime Minister Matteo Renzi welcomed al-Sisi’s president in 2014 to Rome as an important destination for Italian arms. Italian weapons and military equipment manufacturers exported goods worth nearly €100m there between 2010 and 2015 and according to three Italian researchers at the SIPRI research institute.

More or less effectively, Italian national oil company ENI has invested heavily in Egypt’s rapidly growing natural gas industry, and is developing the Zohr natural gas field in partnership with the Egyptian government.

The flow of diplomas, arms and gas between Italian and Egyptian partners was disrupted earlier this year, however.

The torture and murder of Italian student Giulio Regeni following his disappearance in Cairo while carrying out research for a doctorate at Cambridge University, sparked a public outcry in Italy which has pushed the Italian government to take at least some symbolic measures against al-Sisi’s regime.

After months of obstruction, delays and cover-ups from the Egyptian Interior Ministry, the Italian government in 2014 cut the military to Egypt.

The suspension of arms sales and the Italian government’s subsequent withdrawal of the Italian Ambassador Mauro Massari from Egypt on 10 April 2015. A determined campaign by Amnesty International and Giulio’s parents under the banner “Truth for Giulio” pushed the Italian parliament to make al-Sisi’s first “act of farewell” against the Egyptian authorities its legal cooperation, voting to halt Italy’s supply of spare parts and new F-16 fighter jets to Egypt in June.  

UK

Reading from the same script as their German and Italian counterparts, British ministers and diplomats are also full of praise for the benefits of partnership and collaboration with Egypt’s security state.

Egyptian Foreign Minister Sameh Shoukry and his Tory counterpart Jeremy Hunt signed a Memorandum of Understanding for security cooperation in November 2015, during al-Sisi’s official visit to London.

The agreement commits the Home Office and the Egyptian Ministry of Interior to “a regular high-level dialogue both bilaterally and across a wide range of areas, including counter-terrorism, illegal migration and organised crime,” according. Hammond claimed at the time, the beginning of “a new stage in our British-Egyptian partnership for stability and reform.”

Commerce has also signed the wheels of the Italian-Egyptian relationship in recent years. Egypt is an important destination for Italian arms. Italian weapons and military equipment manufacturers exported goods worth nearly €100m there between 2010 and 2015 and according to three Italian researchers at the SIPRI research institute.

Trade links are also strong: at the 2015 Egyptian Economic Development Conference, Philip Hammond promised the delegation of British investors including Oxford, Vodafone, Barclays and BG Group. The UK was the largest foreign investor in Egypt in 2014 according to the UK Foreign Office.

France

Egypt’s role as a major customer for French arms industry is driving the behind the current warm relationship between Cairo and Paris. The purchase of Rafale fighter jets, missiles and a frigate was hailed by the French press, not only for its $7bn Euro price tag, but also as the key to encouraging other prospective customers.

Multiple meetings between French and Egypt’s security officials during the 2015 deal, starting with the French Defence Minister’s visit to Cairo in September 2014, then by al-Sisi’s visit to France in March 2015, were followed by the French Finance Minister, Prime Minister, Foreign minister and finally president Francois Hollande to taking place over the following two years.

Hollande’s Cairo visit this April was also linked to a major arms deal, according to the French news website Le Monde. A new purchase including Rafale fighter aircraft, navy vessels and a military satellite communication system worth €1bn was set to be discussed. Smaller French weapons and military equipment included an important role in the armoury of al-Sisi’s security state, Amnesty International warned.

Although France claims to have halted its cooperation with the Egyptian Interior Ministry around police training since following Monia Elshehawy’sбар French-made armoured cars and ammunition are used by the Egyptian security forces and police to repress protests.

Beyond selling arms, France exports cereals, pharmaceutical products, vehicles and petrochemical products, with exports rising by nearly 20 percent in 2014. Direct investment by French companies in Egypt in 2014 was €2bn, making the country the fifth largest source of foreign investment in Egypt.

Partners in repression

Foreign governments selling or transferring arms and equipment which could be used in repression are not only complicit in the regime’s policies of repression, they are actively encouraging them and must stop, says Amnesty.

“Ab Initio, particularly EU member states and the USA, must use their influence to pressure Egypt to end these appalling violations, which are being committed with the false pretext of “security and counter-terrorism,” said Philip Luther, Amnesty International’s MENA Director.

“Instead of continuing to blindly supply security and police equipment to Egypt they should cease all transfers of arms and equipment that have been used to commit serious human rights violations in Egypt until deliberate efforts to end such atrocities have been established, thorough and independent investigations are conducted and those responsible are brought to justice.”

Research and reporting by Carllotta Mignardi, Sara Olsson, Alice Finden and Anne Alexander
Made in Europe: the arsenal of Sisi’s security state

FRANCE
Official visits: Nov 2014 (Sisi visit to France); Jan 2015 (Egyptian Foreign Minister to France); May 2015 (Egyptian PM to France); Aug 2015 (French President to Egypt); Oct 2015 (French PM to Egypt); Mar 2016 (French Foreign Minister to Egypt); Apr 2016 (French President to Egypt)
Arms exports: Sale of Rafale fighter jets and a navy frigate worth €4.4bn in 2015
Security and military cooperation: France supplies small arms, ammunition, and armoured vehicles used by Egyptian security forces and police in internal repression and plays a scaling role in the EUROMED-Peace project which includes Egypt, according to Amnesty International.
Business deals: Besides arms, French companies also export pharmaceuticals, vehicles, cereals and petrochemical products to Egypt. French direct investment in Egypt totalled €2.5bn in 2014.

POLICING THE BORDERS
Across Europe, governments justify their collaboration with Sisi’s regime on the grounds of combating the “fight against terrorism” with stopping “illegal migration”.

Ministers in Germany, Italy and the UK have all announced that Egypt is a vital player in their deadly policies aimed at halting the flow of refugees fleeing war, poverty and repression by blocking legal and safe routes to Europe from North Africa and the Middle East.

GERMANY
Official visits: May 2015 (German Foreign Minister to Egypt); Jun 2015 (Sisi visit to Germany); Mar 2016 (German Interior Minister to Egypt); Jul 2016 (Egyptian Interior Minister to Germany)
Arms exports: €13.9bn (2014); €12.8bn (2015)
Security and military cooperation: German police and armed forces in support of the Egyptian interior ministry working on counter-terrorism. In 2015, new security agreements focused on fighting terrorism and combating illegal migration.
Business deals: Siemens contracted to supply power stations (€6.7bn) signed in 2013

ITALY
Official visits: Aug 2014 (Italian PM to Egypt); Nov 2014 (Sisi visit to Italy); Nov and Dec 2014 (Italian Defense Minister to Egypt); Mar 2015 (Italian PM to Egypt)
Arms exports: €22.7bn (2014)
Security and military cooperation: Defence agreement signed in December 2014 includes cooperation in defence training and border controls. Italy and Egypt working together on counter-terrorism during 2015, according to Italian Foreign Minister, Paolo Gentiloni.
Business deals: Italian firm ENI is developing the Zohr natural gas field in partnership with the Egyptian government and expects to invest €4.5 - 7.6 bn

UNITED KINGDOM
Official visits: Oct 2014 (Egyptian Foreign Minister to UK); Mar 2015 (UK Foreign Minister to Egypt); Nov 2015 (Sisi visit to UK)
Arms exports: £1.1bn (2015)
Security cooperation: A new agreement signed in November 2015 commits the Home Office and Egyptian Ministry of Interior “to a regular high-level dialogue over counter-terrorism, illegal migration and organized crime.”
Business deals: Energy giant BP is a major investor in Egypt, signing three agreements in 2015 to pump £9.4bn into the West Nile Delta gas field. UK investments in Egypt for 2014 alone totalled £38bn.
Campaigning lawyer Mahmoud Belal is the deputy director of the Criminal Justice Unit at the Egyptian Centre for Economic and Social Rights.

Middle East Solidarity: What happens when somebody is arrested in Egypt?

Mahmoud: During a mass arrest, the arrested people are taken by the police, then usually sent to security camps where they are kept in custody and are very badly treated.

We also have the phenomenon of the public prosecutors working in these detention camps to interrogate detainees. Such mass arrests are generally related to politics or demonstrations.

The camps are run by the Central Security Forces (CSF) which were established in the late 1960s especially to deal with public gatherings. They are able mobilise a huge number of troops. The officers choose uneducated conscripts to guarantee that they can control them, and the troops will obey instructions without any opposition. They are very cruel and usually treat people very badly. The CSF camps are located in remote districts around Cairo and in remote districts or suburbs around other big cities. They are totally isolated and it is very hard for the detainees’ families to gain access to such places.

Middle East Solidarity: How would you find out that somebody has been arrested in order to go and represent them?

Mahmoud: We follow the news and the tweets and social media statuses of political activists or people taking part in a gathering or assembly.

As lawyers, we inform each other about the numbers arrested, their names, and the charges. The public prosecution is not transparent at all in the way it deals with such cases. So our difficulties start from the very early days of arrest.

We have lot of difficulties in making copies of the case files. In some cases we are not allowed to have even a look at any document from the case files.

We usually have difficulties visiting our clients. We also have a problem with public prosecutors. They are so offensive. They deal with detainees and their lawyers as traitors, and when it comes to a prominent political activist or a human rights defender, things become worse.

Pre-trial detention can be extended to a couple of years. In half a year the public prosecution lawyer is able to detain the defendant for a very long time without being referred to any court or facing any judge.

Middle East Solidarity: What happens when the case gets to trial?

Mahmoud: The trial phase often starts with the referral of the defendants to special courts which are called terrorism courts.

These courts only deal with terrorist incidents but with also with all political cases, or assembly cases, or any cases which are related to political activities. The terrorism courts usually sentence people to the maximum punishment they can.

These courts generally ignore the law and the trials are held in very remote areas which are under the control of the police, such as the Police Academy in New Cairo.

Usually the family of the defendants don’t have access to such places and in some cases we as lawyers are also denied access to those courtrooms or so-called courtrooms.

Those places are under total control of the police. In most of these cases the police are our opponents, so we don’t think it is OK for them to host the trials.

In general we can say we face a lot of politicised trials, which violate fair trial standards.

Sometimes defendants’ families and lawyers turn up to the courts, but are denied access to the hearing.

Once the judge ordered the guards to prevent the defendants themselves and their lawyers from entering the courtroom and then sentenced the defendants in absentia.

As defence lawyers we were waiting at the door of the courtroom but the guards told us the judge had instructed them not to let us in.

Minutes later, the judge sentenced our defendant in absentia, and the policemen came and arrested him as a fugitive, while he was standing at the door of the court.

Middle East Solidarity: What sort of support do families have to give to somebody who is detained?

Mahmoud: Families suffer a lot while their relatives are in cells. It costs a lot to visit a detainee, and to give him some food or some clothes and so on. The prisons sell goods at very high prices, and so families usually want to collect a lot of things that their relatives might need.

The families also find a lot of difficulties in visiting their relatives. The public prosecutors are not co-operative in such issues and in some cases they don’t give permission for families to visit.

Even if the family do obtain permission they usually wait for half a day in a huge queue in front of the gate of the prison, and in some cases they will only see their relative for 5 minutes. The visits are hosted in very crowded areas which are so loud in which you cannot hear your relatives.

Middle East Solidarity: How important is campaigning and solidarity for the prisoners themselves and for their families?

Mahmoud: It is very important. Firstly the detainees needs to feel that they are not forgotten, that people outside the prison care about them.

This is especially important in political cases as the detainees feels that they sacrificed their freedom for a cause. So it is a very good thing for the detainees that people sympathise with them, that there are campaigns on social media, that lawyers are working on the case.

That makes a huge difference, especially emotionally. Also it is very important to keep raising the voices of the detainees while they are being prevented from delivering their messages or speaking about their situation.

Our fight for the Rule of Law in our country needs to throw a spotlight on violations of the law.

The first step is to confess that we are having a problem in the application of the law in our country. We cannot know where the problem is without experiencing it.

Taking up the cases we do is very important to guarantee that the detainees are not forgotten in their cells. We are doing an important job advocating for the political detainees and hoping for a better tomorrow.
Egyptian activists released Egypt Solidarity

Campaigners in Egypt and around the world celebrated the release of several prominent political activists in August including lawyers Mahienour el-Masry, Malek Adly, journalist Youssef Shaban, and doctor Taher Mokhtar.

Vigorous local and international campaigns had helped to keep their cases in the public eye during their time in detention. Mahienour and Youssef completed 15 month sentences for breaching Egypt's notorious anti-protest laws in August.

On her release Mahienour called on activists to stand with the thousands who remain in jail. “As the numbers detained in Egyptian prisons increases, we all need to mobilise solidarity with every detainee,” she said in a video statement.

“We need to show solidarity for the detainees who are defending the goals of the 25 January revolution, and that means completing the work they started, not just campaigning in solidarity with them in prison.” Malek Adly, a prominent human rights lawyer and activist, was arrested in May this year and held in solitary confinement on charges relating to the 25 April protests over the Tiran and Sanafir Islands. His legal team successfully challenged a further extension to his pre-trial detention, and he was released on 28 August.

Malek's detention and the terrible conditions he endured in prison sparked a major campaign in Egypt and across the world.

The week before his release, lawyers from around Europe published an open letter calling for Malek’s release, coordinated by Egypt Solidarity Initiative.

Signatories included Richard Harvey QC and John Hendy QC; Professor Bill Bowring, Professor of Law, Birkbeck, University of London; UK, Bjorn Elmquist, Chairman of the Danish Legal Affairs Association and Thomas Schmidt from European Association of Lawyers for Democracy and World Human Rights ELDH.

The letter was widely reported in the Egyptian media, and followed similar protests by the Council of Bars and Law Societies of Europe and the United Nations’ Working Group on Arbitrary Detention.

Doctor activist Taher Mokhtar was arrested in January in the crackdown during the run-up to the anniversary of the 2011 revolution along with his flatmates. Hundreds of leading doctors, academics and trade unionists from the UK, Greece, the USA and other countries signed a protest statement calling for their release which was delivered to the Egyptian embassy in London. He was released from pre-trial detention in August.
BACKGROUND

Bahrain is a small island situated just 16 miles off the coast of Saudi Arabia, with whom many Bahrainis have close tribal as well as economic ties. Bahrain has a population of approximately 3.4m people, although sources vary, and approximately half of this number are non-national migrant workers. The ruling family is Sunni, and has traditionally enjoyed the support of the minority Sunni population. Shī‘a Bahrainis, who make up two-thirds of the population are largely excluded from political power. However, some Shī‘a occupy government positions, and some prominent Sunnis oppose the regime.

The Bahraini monarchy has strong historical links with the UK, from the signing of the General Treaty of Peace between Bahrain and Britain in 1820 until the present day. From 1880 until 1971, Bahrain was a British protectorate. The UK, for example, has increased its diplomatic presence in Bahrain and has taken steps to improve its economic ties. Bahrain has a base on the island in a reversal of the British position on the island since 1820 until the present day. This was made permanent when they moved into the base being vacated by the British in 1995.

Recently the UK announced that it too will station a naval base on the island in a reversal of the policy of withdrawal from bases East of Suez which has been in effect since 1971.

The regime’s natural power base have been left confused by its dual survival strategy of sectarianism and promises of dialogue and reform.

The repression experienced by protesters during the uprising, and the period of martial law after the uprising was crushed with the help of the Saudi Arabian military, was on a scale unseen previously. This period of hyper-repression saw protesters killed in the streets by the military, tortured to death in prisons, many thousands imprisoned, and an even larger number forced out of the country by the government, and other Western allies.

The violence of the crackdown showed the scale of the threat to the Al Khalifa family’s grip on power. Thus the counter-revolutionary strategy employed by the Bahraini government was to deconstruct the cross-sect alliances which were a feature of the 2011 uprising. The uprising was a popular one that had support from a cross-section of Bahraini society, and engaged constituencies that had not been present in previous uprisings. Bahraini Sunnis as well as Bahraini Shī‘a took to the streets. Repression targeted not only Shī‘a’s political leaders, but also Sunni activists, such as Ibrahim Sharif, who called for Bahrainis of all sects to join the uprising and presenting a united front. Yet the international context had also changed: the Bahraini regime’s traditional Western allies urged the Al Khalifa family to re-legitimise their rule by tempering repression with promises of reform. The King of Bahrain appointed the Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry (BICI) report to investigate the events that occurred during the three months following the 14 February uprising, with the report confirming, amongst other things, that extrajudicial killings were carried out by the security services, and that systematic torture was taking place in the country’s police stations and prisons. The Commission also called for a “national reconciliation programme”, interpreted by many as proposing dialogue with opposition groups.

The report and its recommendations were accepted in full by the King. There was a further complicating factor: the 2011 uprising also saw the growth of political consciousness among the regime’s Sunni supporters. They had been increasingly impatient with the ruling family’s tactics, and their frustrations have spawned new political currents. For example, the National Unity Gathering originated as a counter-protest to the mass mobilisation against the regime. They gave birth to a Sunni political society that took part in the 2014 elections (failing to win any seats).

The frustrations of the regime’s Sunni power base have often been expressed as criticism of the government for failing to live up to its promises to the Sunni community. It has even been interpreted by many as proposing its dual survival strategy of sectarianism and promises of dialogue and reform. There are other factors which probably play a role in the timing of the Bahraini government’s repression of al-Wefaq. Perhaps the West’s need for Muslim countries to join their coalition against ISIS coupled with their frustration and fraying relations with al-Wefaq (whose boycott of the 2014 elections was criticised strongly by Western diplomats), meant that the Bahraini government had to take action at this time to appease the Sunni constituency in Bahrain. The UK, for example, has increased its military commitments to Bahrain, announcing recently that it would station a navy base in the country for the first time since independence in 1971. This was accompanied with the revelation that the Bahraini government would pick up the cost at around £15m. Is that – with Britain’s referendum, and subsequent Brexit and change of Prime Minister and other key personnel, as well as the ongoing US elections and the various attacks that have taken place across Europe – the Bahraini government has judged now is the time to appease the Sunni constituency in Bahrain. And at a time when the UK government, and other Western allies of Bahrain, are opting out of local politics in return for support for their geopolitical concerns, there certainly are signs of populist discontent on the increase across the region.

What is emerging is a new phase of state repression which can be viewed as a survival strategy as the Al Khalifa family seeks to re-legitimise their rule. Despite the intimidation, the sit-in continued over the summer and into September, with hundreds defying curfews and arrests.

Protests still defy repression

When the Bahraini authorities revoked the nationality of Sheikh Isa Qassim, spiritual leader of the country’s Shī‘a community in June this year, hundreds of protesters in his home village of Duraz, near the capital Manama took to the streets. Their peaceful sit-in prompted an unprecedented lockdown of the village, subjecting the whole community to a form of collective punishment.

Bahraini human rights groups have highlighted how road closures and checkpoints around the village stopped non-Duraz residents from entering the area, while local residents qued in order to get into and out of their homes. An internet blackout was also in operation during the summer. During July and August dozens of court summons of Shī‘a clerics and religious singers for participating in an ‘illegal gathering’ sought to break protesters’ resolve.

Despite the intimidation, the sit-in continued over the summer and into September, with hundreds defying curfews and arrests. For Bahraini activists, the key factors explaining the shift in the regime’s approach are to be found closer to home. They are a pre-emptive attempt to head off the next uprising, which the history of Bahrain suggests is likely to be on the way. And at a time when the UK government, and other Western allies of Bahrain, are opting out of local politics in return for support for their geopolitical concerns, there certainly are signs of populist discontent on the rise across the region.
UK academics mobilise for Giulio Regeni

The annual congress of the University and College Union (UCU), representing over 110,000 academics and other higher and further education professionals across the UK, voted in June overwhelmingly in favour of a motion for a campaign to push for truth for murdered Cambridge PhD student Giulio Regeni and justice for all of Egypt’s disappeared.

The motion was proposed by colleagues of Giulio’s from the UCU Cambridge branch and seconded by UCU’s Scotland region.

After the resolution was adopted, over 400 delegates took part in a photo action to show their solidarity with Amnesty International’s #TruthforGiulio campaign.

The union will now work with Amnesty, other trade unions and the organisers of the Open Letter on Giulio Regeni and Enforced Disappearances in Egypt to build a national campaign. Shane Enright, Amnesty’s community organiser for trade unions and workplaces said: “I am delighted that UCU has taken a strong stand in support of the call for Truth for Giulio and I expect many other unions to join the call. We look forward to working with UCU over the coming months to organise a campaign on university campuses, involving our hundreds of Amnesty student groups, aimed at increasing pressure on the British government to take action against enforced disappearances and impunity in Egypt.”

The motion follows months of activity in Cambridge, where the local UCU branch has worked with the Cambridge City and University Amnesty groups to build a broad campaign calling for action against enforced disappearances in Egypt and truth for Giulio, who was studying for his PhD at the Centre for Development Studies at the University of Cambridge and vanished while doing fieldwork in Cairo on January 25 this year. His tortured body was found nine days later.

Around 200 students, academics and local people joined a rally in Cambridge on 22 April, addressed by MP Daniel Zeichner and supported by Cambridge UCU, Cambridge University Student Union, Amnesty, Egypt Solidarity Initiative and local trade unions including the National Union of Journalists.

This was followed by a public meeting of 70 people on 20 May with a broad range of speakers including Cambridge UCU’s Dr Waseem Yaqoob.

On their strike days last month, Cambridge University and Anglia Ruskin University pickets also joined a photo action in support of the campaign. UCU also backed a photo action and rally in Bloomsbury on 27 May which was addressed by Sean Wallis of University College London UCU and the union’s national executive.

The protest brought 50 people together to show their support for the Truth for Giulio campaign and to illustrate the horrific overcrowding in Egyptian prison cells – the destination of many victims of enforced disappearance – where 48 prisoners are often crammed into an 8 x 5 metre cell with little access to drinking water or toilets.

The union joins the National Union of Journalists which also recently passed a resolution proposed by the Cambridge branch, calling for a joint campaign with other trade unions and Amnesty over Giulio’s case and enforced disappearances in Egypt.

UCU is a long-standing supporter of Egypt Solidarity Initiative and a national affiliate of MENA Solidarity Network, Egypt Solidarity Initiative’s parent organisation.

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The union called on the Turkish authorities “to cease all repressive actions against Turkish education employees and to respect and guarantee academic freedom, institutional autonomy and quality education for all by involving education employees in all decisions concerning the education sector and recognising education trade unions as professional organisations.”

Cambridge trade unionists call for justice for Egypt’s disappeared

They are journalists, students, lawyers, doctors and engineers: Egyptians from all walks of life have been jailed by the al-Sisi regime. A protest organised by UCU, Amnesty and Egypt Solidarity Initiative highlighted how people from all walks of life have been hit by repression. Activists hold up the names and professions of 48 actual prisoners, crammed into a 5 x 8 metre cell marked out in chalk on the pavement.

Cell protest exposes horrific overcrowding in Egyptian jails

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Crackdown continues for Turkish academics

On 20 July 2016, lecturers’ union UCU called on Turkish authorities to end violations of academic freedoms that followed the failed military coup d’état on 15 July.

In the days following the attempted coup, the Turkish government suspended more than 15,000 employees of the education ministry. A further 1,500 university deans were asked to resign.

This crackdown follows on from previous investigations and arrests of academic staff earlier this year.

In January, a group of academics signed an open letter that called on the Turkish government to end violence towards Kurds in Turkey.

The “Academics for Peace” petition was signed by 1,126 academics in Turkey and elsewhere.

The signatories were immediately accused of treason and spreading “terrorist organisation propaganda” by President Erdogan, who called for their prosecution.

As of 30 March there had been 533 administrative investigations and 159 legal investigations of signatories and a further 38 dismissals, 30 suspensions and 38 detentions.

Despite solidarity campaigns from thousands of scholars worldwide, the Turkish government increased their attacks on the academics, accusing them of plotting a coup on 25 March.

When the attempted coup took place, it was not led by academics campaigning for peace in Kurdistan, but large sections of the Turkish military.

Protests in the streets and the failure of the plotters to capture Erdogan meant the coup quickly ran out of steam.

Groups which oppose Erdogan’s repression and the resumption of the war on the Kurds also refused to back the coup and have continued to mobilise protests demanding democratic freedoms.

Yet Erdogan’s response has been to lash out with repression directed at opponents across the political spectrum, including academics involved in the Academics for Peace campaign.

UCU’s letter states “Turkey must stop using educators as scapegoats in response to the unlawful actions of the military and immediately cease its witch hunt in the country’s schools and universities”.

The union called on the Turkish authorities “to cease all repressive actions against Turkish education employees and to respect and guarantee academic freedom, institutional autonomy and quality education for all by involving education employees in all decisions concerning the education sector and recognising education trade unions as professional organisations.”
Solidarity with the Alexandria Shipyard workers

Workers from Alexandria Shipyard are on trial in an Egyptian military court for taking strike action to demand better pay and conditions at work. They were arrested after staging a sit-in at the yard to call for payment of bonuses, permanent contracts for 36 temporary workers and safety equipment.

Leading trade unionists from the port cities in Greece and the UK have backed the campaign in solidarity with the workers in the run up to their military court hearing on 18 October.

Leaders of the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU) have also added their voices to the worldwide condemnation of the military trial.

What you can do:
For updates and resources go to: egyptsolidarityinitiative.org/alexshipyard/

Support Nabeel Rajab

Nabeel Rajab, the President of the Bahrain Center for Human Rights, was arrested and detained by Bahraini authorities in June of this year. There was no immediate evidence as to why he was detained. Since then he has been held in pre-trial detention, largely in solitary confinement, and his health has deteriorated as a result.

On 15 September, 22 NGOs wrote to 50 states urging the release of Rajab and to speak out on the violation of human rights in Bahrain.

What you can do:
Go to www.bahrainrights.org for updates on the case and actions to take.

Justice for Giulio

The torture and murder of Giulio Regeni, an Italian doctoral student at the University of Cambridge, during a research visit to Cairo, has thrown a spotlight onto the hundreds of cases of forced disappearances and torture in Egypt. Thousands of people around the world have signed petitions and statements calling for justice, and more pressure will be needed to stop a cover-up by the Egyptian authorities.

The lecturers’ union UCU, Cambridge University Students’ Union and Amnesty International are among the organisations backing the campaign.

What you can do:
Go to egyptsolidarityinitiative.org/justice-for-giulio/ for updates on campaigning activities this autumn.

Free Ibrahim Halawa

In 2013, Ibrahim Halawa, then a 17 year old Irish school boy, was arrested in Egypt during the brutal clampdown on protests following the military coup. Since then he has been in jail awaiting trial. Like tens of thousands of other prisoners in Egypt, Ibrahim has been detained in terrible conditions which have severely affected his health. On 5 October the court due to hear his case postponed the hearing for the fifteenth time.

What you can do:
Go to www.facebook.com/FreeIbrahimHalawa to find out more about the campaign.

MENA Solidarity

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

Bahrain Watch

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

Egypt Solidarity

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.

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Horrific conditions in Greece’s new military-run refugee camps are also the responsibility of the EU and UK, argues Sara Olsson.

It is a very hot day on the industrial outskirts of Thessaloniki, Northern Greece. A couple of buses from “Crazy Holidays” have just parked in front of the former Softex toilet roll factory. They are full of refugees, many of them children. In front of them, a massive grey factory building. Inside: rows and rows of tents. Outside: gravel. Upon leaving the buses many people start to cry. None of them have been told where they are to be taken. A woman asks me where we are, if I can put a pin on the map on her phone, and how long they are going to stay here.

It is now a few days since the Greek authorities announced the closure of the Idomeni refugee camp on the Greek-Macedonian border. For two days journalists and volunteers have been prohibited from entering the area whilst the military is emptying the camp of its 8,000 people and bulldozing the leftovers.

The Greek military is bussing people out to smaller camps set up by the government, where everyone is being counted and registered. I have spent the last few days tracking down military convoys across the whole of Northern Greece in order to find the sites where refugees are taken. Softex is one of these military camps and it soon becomes clear why our presence is not welcome.

Myself and five other volunteers are the only ones here, except the military and of course the people forced to stay in these camps. There is no Doctors Without Borders, no Save the Children or Red Cross, and no UNHCR. So together with Softex’s new, confused and scared inhabitants, we start helping to clean the dirty floors of glass and gravel. The air is thick and grey with dust. It is hard to breathe and the children scratch their eyes while the smaller babies are coughing alarmingly.

There are no toilets, no showers, no running water, no shade and at first no food - until independent volunteers from Idomeni Hot Food arrive. A mother asks me for special powder milk for her one-month-old baby daughter. I ask someone from the military, but he just shakes his head. They are busy with putting a wire fence around the camp and painting the building white. Three days later when I visit the mother she still has no access to the powdered milk her baby needs.

The camp fills up quickly, while buses continue to arrive. Three days later we can count 1,600 people and the tents have spread outside the factory building onto the gravel ground under the relentlessly hot sun. Mohammed, a young man from Syria, tells me that they are only going to stay here for a few days: “This must be temporary, right?”

That was three months ago. Now I am told that the people in Softex still do not have enough food, sanitation or medical services. Child care and food distribution is organised by independent volunteers - people who have saved some money to go and help out with whatever they can. Fantastic in itself, but no long term solution. And while the UK is discussing the pros and the cons of Brexit for future “immigration flows”, women and children as young as seven are being raped and sexually assaulted in Softex, according to media reports.

It is time that the EU and UK governments acknowledge their share of responsibility for this horrific situation, instead of forcing yet another austerity package onto already-struggling Greece.

The EU calls for cooperation across Europe over immigration policies and securitisation. But those countries which bear the brunt of these policies are left to fend for themselves, and innocent people are dying as a result.

Sara Olsson worked as a volunteer in Idomeni and Softex camp from 16-30 May 2016