The Gulf’s tyrants and their British backers

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- Moroccan activist speaks out
  ‘Your solidarity matters’
Middle East Solidarity is backed by Bahraini cartoonist Ali al-Bazzaz was one of over sixty journalists sacked in 2011 during the crackdown against the pro-democracy uprising. Al-Bazzaz, who worked for the pro-government newspaper Al Ayam, was fired after attending the Pearl Roundabout protest. He has struggled to find employment since, despite the popularity of his work and his pointed political satire. A short interview with al-Bazzaz, dubbed into English is available here: www.youtube.com/watch?v=6tJDMhLSIuc

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.

Our practical guides to campaigning and resources for activists aim to build a stronger solidarity movement. Middle East Solidarity is a joint project of MENA Solidarity Network, Egypt Solidarity Initiative and Bahrain Watch, and is supported by funding from UCU, PCS, NUT and a number of Trades Union Councils and local trade union branches.

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

Editors:
Anne Alexander
Luke G.G. Bhatia
John Horne

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

Designer:
Ben Windsor

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DEAR MOHAMED,

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

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

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

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

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

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

A doctor celine undertook ad hoc surgery using pliers and a razor with no anaesthesia or sterilization. You are an incredibly social human being, and need to be around others. I imagine you using that half hour to get some much-needed human contact.

You're an incredibly social human being, and others. You're an incredibly social human being, and others. You're an incredibly social human being, and others. You're an incredibly social human being, and others.

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

Your sister, and best friend,

HANAA

Hanaa’s brother Mohamed was sentenced to 25 years in jail by an Egyptian court on 11 April 2015. This is an edited version of a letter she published on Open Democracy and Amnesty International’s websites on the eve of his sentencing. Amnesty is campaigning for Mohamed’s immediate release.

Turn to page 26 for more on the campaign.
**Middle East Solidarity spoke to Switzerland-based Syrian revolutionary activist Joseph Daher about the situation in free areas of Syria on the fourth anniversary of the 2011 revolution. You can read more of Joseph’s reports on the Syriafreedomforever blog.**

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

In the free neighbourhoods of Bustan Qasr, Salah al-Din and Masaken Hananou in the northern city of Aleppo, the Council of Revolutions of Aleppo organised mass street protests and a carnival – including theatre plays and concerts, despite bombing by the regime.

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

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

In the city of Douma, hundreds of civilians protested.

A popular youth organisation called The Day After (TDA), which is present in some liberated areas, created a memorial for martyrs from those areas, which listed 200 names of activists, civil defence workers, teachers, photographers, aid workers, doctors and many others.

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

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

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

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

**Backstory**

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

The regime fought back viciously, and in the violence which followed, Islamist militias, with the tacit assistance of the Assad regime, crushed independent grassroots revolutionary groups in areas which had been liberated.

By 2014, 9 million had fled their homes, almost half of Syria’s population. Regime forces surround and partially control the capital city, Damascus, and dominate the coastal plains and key cities such as Homs and Hama.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Rather, it makes the task of cracking down on political organisations and individuals who practice any kind of peaceful opposition even easier.
Stateless Bedoon call for rights
John Horne

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

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

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

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

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

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

The consequences for them and their children have been grave.

Although initially the Bedoon had access to basic services such as health and education, these too were stripped from them in the 1980s and 1990s after the government launched a xenophobic campaign and recategorised them as “illegal residents”.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Civil servants lead pensions strike
Mohamed Boutayeb

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

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

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

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

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

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

This could start by exchanging information about issues facing the movements in the two countries, and learning about each other’s struggles.

We are facing a lot of difficulties in Morocco at the moment because of attacks from the neoliberal regime, and this is something which you in Britain are facing as well.

We also face the issue of repression of trade union activism in the state in Morocco. For example, workers are banned from establishing trade union offices, despite the fact that the law is supposed to allow workers to form trade unions. But in practice you don’t get permission.

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

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

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

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

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

They cannot bring in neoliberal policies without repression of the trade union movement and workers’ activism and strikes. For example, we have a law which was passed in 1967 containing the principle that wages cannot be paid without work, thus allowing the
government to withhold wages from striking workers in order to force them not to take part in strike action. Previous governments did not implement this principle, or only rarely, but the current government has been implementing it in order to stop civil servants from taking part in strikes.

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

Yes, the same is true in Morocco, aided by the break-up of the industrial sector, particularly in textiles. The last seven or eight years in the textile industry has fragmented under the pressure of competition from the Chinese textile industry with the liberalisation of export markets. In 2013, according to official statistics 126,000 textile workers lost their jobs. The transport sector has been completely privatised and wages are very low as a result. However, transport workers are well organised. They participated strongly in the general strike of 29 October 2014, and played a key role in its success.

Another factor which weakens trade union organisation is casualisation, particularly in the private sector. Sixty-five percent of wage workers in Morocco do not have a contract, so it is very difficult for them to join unions. Trade union work in the private sector is stifled because of pressure from the bosses in both the agricultural sector and the industrial sector. They are lobbying the government to implement the law on strikes, which bans solidarity action, and bans political strikes, and creates a number of barriers and restrictions to make it more difficult to strike.

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

In the government sector the trade unions are not very big. Trade unions are represented, and in some sectors there haven’t been protests against privatisation, as doctors and nurses have been active. However, transport workers are well organised. They participated strongly in the general strike of 29 October 2014 and April 2015 have brought tens of thousands onto the streets to challenge the regime’s neoliberal policies and the clampdown on trade union rights.

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

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

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

For example the general strike on 29 October last year was very limited, such pay or working conditions. There have also been militant struggles by court workers, even including the judges, who came out into the streets for the first time in Moroccan history after the 20th February 2011 in very large protests.

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

BACKSTORY

The rising tide of protest across the Arab world in early 2011 sent shockwaves through Morocco, triggering a movement calling for democratic reforms and social justice. Inspired by the success of street protests and strikes against the regimes in Tunisia and Egypt, the 20 February movement demanded the dissolution of parliament, a democratic constitution, the official recognition of Amazigh, the language of Morocco’s Berber population, and the release of political prisoners. Protests spread like wildfire, reaching around 100 towns and cities at the height of the movement.

The regime manoeuvred to regain the initiative, announcing some reforms in March, and playing divide and rule tactics. Leaders of the main trade union federations agreed a secret deal to walk away from the protests in return for major pay increases. Debates over whether to push for radical change, or settle for more modest reforms, began to divide the movement, while repression increased.

Yet although the massive protests of 2011 have receded, other struggles continue. Public sector strikes in February 2013, October 2014 and April 2015 have brought tens of thousands onto the streets to challenge the regime’s neoliberal policies and the clampdown on trade union rights.

Despite the government’s attempts to silence the movement, it remains strong. The textile workers remain active, as doctors and nurses have been active. However, transport workers are well organised. They participated strongly in the general strike of 29 October 2014 and April 2015 have brought tens of thousands onto the streets to challenge the regime’s neoliberal policies and the clampdown on trade union rights.

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

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

Likewise in the health sector, workers there such as doctors and nurses have been active. However there haven’t been protests against privatisation, unfortunately. Rather, we’ve seen strikes for more sectional demands, such pay or working conditions. There have also been militant struggles by court workers, even including the judges, who came out into the streets for the first time in Moroccan history after the 20th February 2011 in very large protests.

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

Challenging sexual violence in Tahrir: the story of OpAntiSH

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

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

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

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

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

This is a testimony from an unnamed woman who survived a sexual violence attack in Tahrir Square on 25 January 2013:

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

“The last thing I heard was ‘don’t worry’, followed by screaming... I then felt hands touch me from all directions, felt hands all over my body, tearing down my trousers and long jacket... I then felt hands touch me from all directions, and I was moved, almost carried, inside the circle as people continued saying: ‘don’t worry’. They were saying that while violating me...

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

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

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

Nadine Marroushi’s story forms part of a much longer account of her experiences in the Egyptian revolution now appearing in a book planned for 2016 called ‘The Egyptian Revolution – A Personal Story’.

Interview | Moroccan union activist

Feature | Challenging sexual violence
I was groped in demonstrations and verbally harassed on a daily basis no matter how conservatively I dressed myself. I was all ages of males – young and old – children and middle aged men. Under Mubarak, who ruled from 1981, incidents of sexual assault against women were rarely discussed or documented, except in the context of female detainees.

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

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

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

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

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

Then we get to the revolution of 2011. As I noted earlier, Tahrir Square, the central space for the revolution, was a safe space for women. That in itself, as many revolutionaries I’ve spoken to note, was quite unique and significant. Until it all changed on that morning. Mubarak stepped down on 11 February. Everyone was jubilant and celebrating, and more protesters no longer controlled the Square through a series of checkpoints.

This was when Lara Logan, a South African journalist reporting for an American news channel, was sexually assaulted by mobs of men in Tahrir. On 9 March 2011, several young Egyptian women were arrested as part of a crackdown by the army on a sit-in protest in Tahrir Square.

Samira Ibrahim was among a number of women who were detained and beaten, given electric shocks, strip-searched and subjected to “virginity tests.” While such tests had in the past taken place, female victims did not speak out against them for fear of being publicly shamed.

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

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

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

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

Despite Sisi’s promises to Amnesty International and the UN that there would be no arrest or detention of women and sexual violence was used against them.

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

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

In November 2012, Yasmine El Baramawy, a female Egyptian activist, went on television and spoke about her experience of sexual assault in Tahrir Square. It was unprecedented. Women just didn’t talk about it so publicly. It was considered too shameful to do so, but she broke that taboo.

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

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

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

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

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

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

They divided themselves up into teams of volunteers. There was the team that would hand out leaflets in the Square just to spread the word so publicly. It was the only time they saw or experience an incident of sexual harassment or assault.

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

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

Only women can decide where their place should be

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

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

Women went in there knowing that they were at risk of being sexually assaulted themselves, and many of them were, as were the men too by the way. After Morsi’s removal and the government took over led by Egypt’s now president Abdelfattah al-Sisi, OpAntiSH ceased to operate as an action force on the ground.

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

All the while mob sexual violence attacks on women continue. We saw at least 38 women being attacked in June 2014 during Sisi’s presidential win and inauguration.

The state’s response to all of this is that the army and the state, including the police and the army are perpetrators of sexual violence crimes.

So what can we learn from the experience of the OpAntiSH initiative? What does this say about her and the right to choose and decide where a woman’s place should be? Only women can decide that.

Some women accept that they don’t have the skills to fight off sexual violence with their bodies and hands but they do have the ability to organize. Others feel they are ready and only the person themselves can decide, man or woman. A woman should always decide how she wants to do it.

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

Finally, this was a group of young people that decided that enough was enough and that something had to be done. They called their friends, sent out emails, and they got a group of people together.

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

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

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

However, OpAntiSH continues to exist as an online group of members and it releases statements taking positions related to women’s rights violations in the name of the group.

OpAntiSH website: www.facebook.com/opantish
Teachers strike for education reform
Mokhtar Ben Hafsa

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

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

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

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

When these promises were not fulfilled, they organised another strike in early October, just before a further rally.

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

Teachers’ demands are to improve pay after years of decline in relation to prices and for the radical reform of the Tunisian education system.

Since the beginning of structural adjustment reforms in the 1990s, Tunisian schools have suffered collapsing infrastructure and curricula. But successive governments, including those which came to power after the revolution, have considered secondary schools and other social services, to be a severe burden on the public budget, and have thus deepened austerity and cuts from one year to the next.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Egypt’s sectarian state was challenged by the revolution
Samleh Naguib

The current population of Egypt is around 90 million people. Between 10-15 percent of these people are Coptic Orthodox Christians, which is the main religious minority in Egypt.

There are other minorities but they are much smaller in size.

The Coptic community has seen different periods throughout its history. Since Islam entered Egypt there have been periods of discrimination and sectarian violence.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

This meant that the movement had a secular, democratic aspect to it, which made it impossible for Islamists, for
example, to try and separate the two communities.

Being a central aspect of the revolution, this did not just mean that Christians as citizens participated, it meant that Christians as an oppressed minority started having their own questions about the path they wanted to go down. In this particular things that were taking place against them, for example churches being burned and different forms of discrimination.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Indeed, in Sisi’s main speech in 2013 when he announced the coup, next to him was the army chief of staff who issued the coup directly. This gave the signal that the army protects the Copts as long as they remain within the framework of the Church: as long as they stop going to Tahrir Square and don’t appear again on the political scene.

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

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

His argument is that the Muslim Brotherhood is Daesh (ISIS). He claims that if the revolution continues, Egypt will only face more Islamists.

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

At the same time, I think it’s our duty to be careful not to fall into a blood and fury and show how that Daesh (ISIS) cannot be understood by reading the Koran or by going back to Islamic history. Trying to find reasons for ISIS in the religion doesn’t make any sense. It’s a form of essentialism.

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

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BDS gathers pace on campus
John Horne

A ctivists at SOAS, University of London, won a significant victory in February when a campus-wide referendum voted overwhelmingly to endorse an academic boycott of Israel. 73 percent of voters backed the motion to sever links with Israeli institutions, such as the Hebrew University. The ‘Yes’ Campaign described it as “a historic victory for the boycott, divestment and sanctions (BDS) movement” which “reinforces the demands of the BDS call issued in 2005 by Palestinian civil society organisations.” Activists at SOAS hope the success of their campaign will inspire similar actions across British campuses.

A historic result
In a statement, the Palestine Society and BDS Campaign at SOAS said: “The historic result has brought us one step further in our struggle for freedom and justice. “We call upon other universities to show their solidarity by joining the academic boycott.” They stress that the academic boycott “targets Israeli institutions complicit in the oppression of Palestinians, not individuals,” adding that “open enquiry, free exchange of ideas, and intellectual freedom are crucial to every academic community”.

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

Intellectual freedom faced a setback at the University of Southampton after management there withdrew permission for a planned conference on “International Law and the State of Israel” following pressure from the pro-Israel lobby. Many academics have spoken out against Southampton’s decision, which is currently being challenged by a judicial review at the High Court.

The importance of solidarity
The devastation wrought last year makes speaking out in solidarity with Palestine more important than ever. In 2014, Israel killed more Palestinian civilians than at any other time since 1967, according to figures from the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA).

In total, Israel was responsible for the deaths of 2,314 Palestinians, the majority of whom were killed during its attack on Gaza last summer which saw 1,492 Palestinian civilians killed, over a third of which (51%) were children.

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

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Protest condemns Yemen bombing
Anne Alexander

A nti-war campaigners and Yemeni activists in London joined forces in a protest against the Saudi-led bombing on 11 April. A demonstration, organised by Stop the War Coalition outside the Saudi embassy called for an immediate end to the military campaign against the Houthi movement.

A war against our people
Yemeni activist Ihab Ribi spoke during the protest about the impact of the war on women and children.

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

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

“I have a message for the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia: we don’t want the legitimacy brought by your war. “We know how to organise our own affairs, we will get through the political crisis ourselves.”

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

The Gulf’s tyrants & their British backers

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

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

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

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

Saudi troops entered Bahrain in a desperate bid to stem the tide of popular revolution which had brought down dictators in Tunisia and Egypt, and now lapped the shores of the Gulf. Hosni Mubarak, a long-time ally of both the Saudis and the US, had fallen from power. A storm of protest was about to break in Syria, as activists sought to bring down Bashar al-Assad’s dictatorship.

Interwoven demands for social justice and democratic rights were spreading like wildfire, challenging the entrenched privileges of decades-old authoritarian regimes.

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

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

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

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

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

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

On the global stage, Britain has long been a second-rate imperial power when compared to the US. Yet in the Gulf, the long history of British colonialism and the Coalition government’s aggressive promotion of connections with the area’s despots since 2010 have given Britain a special role in the counter-revolution.
The mass uprising in Bahrain, coupled with smaller protest movements in Kuwait, Saudi Arabia and Oman, threatened to derail British plans for deeper economic and military ties with the Gulf, a strategy which Ministers are now openly describing as the re-establishment of "a permanent presence East of Suez.”

After the Coalition government came to power in May 2010, the Foreign Office was tasked with the “relaunch of UK engagement with the Gulf states”. Working with the newly established National Security Council, this so-called Gulf Initiative sought to “strengthen regional security and to improve commercial, economic, cultural and educational ties” in order to “enhance UK’s soft power” in the region. Gulf monarchs and their governments were quickly courted. King Hamad of Bahrain, for example, was one of the first foreign leaders to visit David Cameron in Downing Street in July 2010, the same month that the first Gulf Initiative ministerial meeting was held.

By 2013, Cameron was boasting that “over 100 high-level visits – to every country and on every issue” had taken place. The commercial thrust of this initiative emerged plainly in government speeches. Addressing Omani businessmen in October 2010, Foreign Minister Alastair Burt observed that the “Gulf currently accounts for around 50 percent of UK Defence exports” and celebrated recent arms deals done in Oman by BP, HSBC and Defence exports" and celebrated recent accounts for around 50 percent of UK Burt observed that the "Gulf currently

The Arab uprisings... threatened to scupper British plans

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

The Gulf Initiative has been carried out largely away from public scrutiny or awareness. Missing from the scattered documents and speeches of this neo-colonial exercise is any recognition that the suppression of basic democratic and social rights is integral to the authoritarian regimes of the region. In this sense, the Arab uprisings that swept the region in early 2011, bringing visibility to everyday repression, threatened to scupper British plans toward the Gulf, particularly as the Bahraini regime, supported with troops from Saudi Arabia and the UAE, adopted increasingly brutal tactics to crush the pro-democracy movement.

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

The British Embassy currently describes its mission as helping “Bahrain to return to a stable and reformist state… while protecting our significant defence and security interests”. While the Gulf states arrested and tortured political leaders, journalists, unionists and human rights defenders, the British government turned a wilful blind eye and sought to carry on business as usual.

Trade between the UK and the Gulf increased by 39 percent in 2011-12 to £29.8bn. The UK also had no qualms about strengthening the Gulf’s capacity to repress. A UK government brochure from 2014 notes that “all Gulf states are fully capable of building security capabilities and have significant resources to do so” which offers “opportunities” for British firms. One company, Gamma Group, which describes its software that has been used to spy on Bahraini activists, sponsored the 2015 Security & Policing Event run by the Home Office, which Gulf states regularly attend.

Arms sales are central to British interests in the Gulf. The Department of Trade and Industry (UKTI) describes the Gulf states as “priority markets” for defence and security. Although Bahrain was dropped from this status in 2011, that too has been restored, particularly with the promise of a £1bn sale of Typhoon warplanes to the country.

According to government figures, between January 2011 and September 2014, the UK approved more arms exports to UAE and Saudi Arabia than any other country, with exports to the Gulf states totalling over £10.5bn. This defence relationship is further buttressed by British support for arms fairs in the Gulf, such as IDEX in UAE, Milipol in Qatar and the Bahrain International Airshow. Similarly, representatives of Gulf regime’s routinely buy arms fairs in the UK, like DSEI, Security & Policing and the Farnborough International Airshow. Defence sales, however, are just one facet of deepening British commercial interests in the Gulf and the wider Middle East.

Following Cameron’s trip to the region in February 2011, then trade Minister Lord Green established a "Middle East Task Force" which brought business into the heart of British decision making. The group has been largely operating in secret ever since. In 2013, then Foreign Minister Michael Fallon refused to release the minutes of the meetings to an MP, claiming it “would not be in the public interest”, despite the fact that some had been published the previous year following a Freedom of Information request.

The first meeting in July 2011 brought, among others, a British banker and Chairpersons, from Mothecarrell, Shell and HSBC to BAE Systems.

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

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

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

The Egyptian Economic Development Conference (EEDC) which drew nearly 2,000 delegates to the seaside resort of Sharm el-Sheikh on 13-15 March 2015 provided al-Sisi’s regime with a chance to show off its “reforming” credentials to international investors and global politicians. The “reforms” in question are of course, all economic. The corporate and government heads attending the event were unlikely to have asked any awkward questions about other “reforms” which al-Sisi’s military regime has ushered in since seizing power in 2013, such as the notorious anti-protest laws and this year’s new “anti-terror” law which turns every peaceful gathering on the steps of a government building or in a public square into a potential “act of terrorism”.

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

The conference was a joint initiative between Saudi Arabia and Egypt. Since the military overthrew the Muslim Brotherhood affiliated president, Mohamed Morsi in July 2013, Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Kuwait have bankrolled the new regime, releasing billions of dollars in loans, fuel shipments and grants to keep the economy afloat.

Sisi can count on the same constellation of British backers who have been working with his patrons. The list includes the Coalition government, which has lent over $300m to promote trade links with Egypt; Martin Sorrell, the British head of the world’s biggest advertising firm, and the dictator’s favourite ‘strategic consultants’, Tony Blair and Peter Mandelson.

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

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

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

The chief executive of WPP, the world’s largest advertising company, is clearly happy to count Sisi’s regime among his clients. WPP affiliated companies provided the event management for the EEDC, organised media accreditation and are working hard to “reposition” Sisi’s branding for a global audience.

Blair was at pains to point out last year that his “advice” to Sisi was given for free. So maybe his appearance at the EEDC was also strictly pro bono. He was gushing in his praise for Sisi, telling delegates at the conference: “If you think for the first time … in my memory you have a leadership in Egypt that understands the modern world, is prepared to take the measures that are relevant to the modern world, and wants Egypt connected to the modern world in the right way.”

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

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

The Labour peer’s Global Counsel business is a WPP affiliate and its offices are listed on the EEDC conference promoters’ website as their London address. He also chairs the board of Lazard, the financial consultancy which is advising Sisi on his economic policy.

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

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

We need to build a movement which shows that solidarity can be "made in Britain", too.
Conference discusses Arab Revolutions MENA Solidarity

Around 140 people took part in a lively discussion at a conference co-organised by MENA Solidarity, Egypt Solidarity, and Bahrain Watch on 13-14 February. Speakers from Morocco, Bahrain, Egypt, and Syria discussed topics as diverse as sectarianism and counter-revolution, workers’ struggles and the battle for social justice, and prospects for Palestinian liberation.

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

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

‘Empty plates’ protests back hunger strikers Egypt Solidarity

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

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

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

Alaa began his hunger strike on 18 August after prison authorities stalled visits to his critically ill father, only allowing him to reach the hospital after he had already fallen into a coma.

Alaa’s younger sister Sanaa, also spent over 600 days in Tora prison.

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

The movement quickly swelled with students from 11 universities helping to build the campaign with leafleting, ‘empty plates’ protests and lively discussions at a conference after a special screening.

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

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

Audio and video available online at www.menasolidaritynetwork.com

Confiscation of assets slams Abu Dhabi Egypt Solidarity

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

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

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

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

London Sphinx gagged Egypt Solidarity

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

The three Al Jazeera staff members were given 7-10 year jail sentences for allegedly aiding the Muslim Brotherhood and “reporting false news”.

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

His co-defendant Baher Mohamed and Mohamed Fahmy were released on bail and were awaiting a retrial as of late August.

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

The open letter in solidarity with Egypt, which was initiated by Egypt Solidarity and published in the Guardian on 10 November.

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

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

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

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

Journalists resist censors Egypt Solidarity

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

Leading international journalists, including Channel 4’s Jon Snow, the Guardian’s correspondent in Cairo, Patrick Kingsley and Professor of Journalism at City University, Roy Greenslade signed an open letter in solidarity with their colleagues in Egypt, which was initiated by Egypt Solidarity and published in the Guardian on 10 November.

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

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

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

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

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**Campaign case study: #StopTheShipment**

**Bahrain Watch**

Bahrain Watch's 2013 campaign #StopTheShipment demonstrates how coordinated action can help block repressive regimes from rearming. Bahrain Watch received a leaked document in October 2013 from a source close to Bahrain's Ministry of Interior which showed the government's intention to buy 1.6m tear gas canisters since 2011, at least 39 deaths in Bahrain have been linked to misuse of tear gas, according to data compiled by Physicians for Human Rights (PHR).

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

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

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

The Financial Times reported Daekwang's CEO saying that as part of the deal, which was worth USD $28 million, the Bahraini government was planning to buy 3 million tear gas canisters – around 4 canisters for each Bahraini citizen.

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

Korean activists staged a ‘die-in’ outside DAPA offices during a protest backed by trade unions, peace organisations and human rights groups. The Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU) demanded that the Korean government refuses to grant an export license. The KCTU wrote to DAPA, which oversees the defence industry and the National Police Agency, saying: “Recently, Bahraini government had indiscriminately fired large amount of tear gas and resulted in hundreds of casualties... One cannot avoid condemnation, both in humanitarian and international standard sense, by exporting Korean canisters to the country where hundreds are either being killed or injured by them.”

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

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

Due to the pressure created by the #StopTheShipment campaign, South Korea’s DAPA denied two requests to export tear gas to Bahrain citing as reasons the “unstable politics in the country (Bahrain), people’s death due to tear gas and complaints from human rights groups”.

**Investigation exposes land sales**

**Bahrain Watch**

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

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

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

In February 2013, the King of Bahrain issued a law giving himself the sole authority to grant state land rights. The investigation details how plots of land, or plots at sea yet to be reclaimed, were transferred to a private company called Premier Group, or to a host of its subsidiaries.

Those familiar with the situation say that Premier Group is an investment vehicle for the Bahraini royal family. Some of these plots were later exchanged for stakes in multibillion dollar joint ventures with Islamic Banks and other investors to build housing, commercial property and luxury hotels,” the Financial Times reported.

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

In a statement to the Financial Times, the Premier Group's board said the investment was for the Bahraini royal family with no timetable for the changes.

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

Shaimaa was shot in the back as she walked through Tahrir Square to lay a wreath of flowers on 24 January. Read more on the Playfair Qatar campaign here playfairqatar.org.uk

**Road Block @ Shubbak Festival**

**Bahrain Watch**

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

The Road Bloc Collective are a group of artists and activists who explore how power is written into urban space through architecture and images. As parts of Bahrain transform into territories of dissent, where roundabouts become ‘squares’ and spaces for political speech and action, graffiti is visible like never before and road blocks and marches are part of everyday life – we see the scenography and spectacle of revolution.

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

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

Abdulhadi al-Khawaja (Bahrain)

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

Nabeel Rajab (Bahrain)

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

Zainab al-Khawaja (Bahrain)

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

Hussain Jawad (Bahrain)

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

Sanaa Seif (Egypt)

Student Sanaa Seif was also arrested on 21 June 2014 during the same demonstration and is serving a two-year sentence. She was campaigning for the release of political prisoners, including her brother Alaa Abdelfattah.

Alaa Abdelfattah (Egypt)

Jailed under Mubarak, Morsi and Sisi, Alaa has been a consistent defender of human rights and free speech. He was sentenced to five years in prison in March 2015 for taking part in an unauthorised protest.

Mohamed Soltan (Egypt)

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

What you can do

Make a protest

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

Make it specific: it is important that the regimes know that individual prisoners have not been forgotten. Look out for information online about dates for trials and appeal hearings to time your action.

Make it public

Don’t just let the ambassador know you’re angry, tell the world. Write to the media, spread the word on social media, or ask your student union or trade union to circulate your letter.

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

Do it together

Collective action is stronger than a lone voice.

Why not organise a joint letter and collect signatures from workmates or other students? Put a resolution to your union branch or student union to send an official protest.

Organise or join a protest to highlight specific cases of repression. 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.

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Go to www.menasolidaritynetwork.com/MEScontributors

MENA Solidarity

MENA Solidarity is a network of activists from different unions in the Middle East, formed in February 2012 that seeks to promote effective, transparent and accountable governance 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 launched in 11 February 2014, the third anniversary of the fall of Mubarak, in order to campaign in defence of democratic rights in Egypt.
Yemen: an ugly war for the Gulf’s money

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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