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Otaybi is one of fourteen artists to feature in P21 Gallery’s recent exhibition, *Sudan: the Emergence of Singularities*. Read Alice Finden’s review of the exhibition in our new Arts and Culture section on page 19.

The P21 Gallery is an independent London-based charitable trust established to promote contemporary Middle Eastern and Arab art and culture.

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**Untitled**

by Mohamed Otaybi

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About us

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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Sudanese activist Asim Bahr Abyad spoke to Jad Bouharoun about his nightmarish journey to Europe through Libya.

It was in July 2016 that I arrived in Paris. I had travelled by land through Sudan and Libya for several months, before I embarked on a small boat on the Mediterranean sea and finally arrived in Italy.

**Before you describe your journey, can you tell us a bit about Sudan and why you and so many others have left?**

The situation in Sudan is very difficult. I come from the White Nile state (Southern part of the country), and people there are stuck between poverty and state repression. Basically, regardless of your education (I am a trained lab technician) you need to be well connected to find a decent job. There is very little work so whatever is available is granted through all sorts of middlemen who have their connections to the State; corruption is virtually unlimited.

At the same time any criticism of government officials, of corruption etc is severely repressed. The government uses armed militias which are recruited in local tribes – so tribal leaders are paid by the government to act as its armed force. Sectarianism is intermeshed with this repression, so they’ll set one ethnicity against another. These armed militias can be used for anything, to harass and arrest political or human rights activists or forcibly evacuate villages to make way for giant sugar factories.

Personally, I was especially targeted because of my political activism; I feared for my family and ended up leaving.

**How do you reach Europe from Sudan?**

To leave Sudan, you need to get in touch with people smugglers. It’s a flourishing business. You pay them and they will find you a way out of the country, by land. Most often to Libya, although sometimes they will take you to Egypt.

**So these people in Sudan will take you all the way through Libya or Egypt and across the Mediterranean?**

No, not at all! I wish it were that simple. The smugglers you contact in Sudan will get you through to the border. They know the safest routes, and can avoid or bribe government militias. Basically they provide you with safe passage and hand you over to the Libyan smugglers. This is where the real nightmare begins.

Sudanese smugglers will treat you with a bit of respect. Of course they are still smugglers and you better pay them, but as a fellow Sudanese you are treated with dignity.

In Libya however things are much more complicated. It’s a very long way from the southern border with Sudan to the shores of the Mediterranean. As you know the country is divided among various militias and warlords, and there is no central State. In theory, you will get handed over from one smuggler to another until you reach the sea. In reality though, you become a hostage to the successive smugglers.

**What does that mean?**

It means that they imprison migrants and ask for large sums of money to release them to the next smuggler, who will do the same – and so on and so forth – until you eventually get on a boat.

Migrants are usually holed up in hangars or any building that can be used as a prison. Sometimes for days on end without food or water; the goal is to make them pay exorbitant amounts (several times over what the smugglers in Sudan charge), often by contacting their families. If you are lucky enough and can pay, then you can get passed over to the next smuggler.

If not, then you are held and compelled to work unpaid for months to “pay your debt”, or sold on to another smuggler or militiaman – basically as a slave. Even worse is the fate of those who can neither pay nor work; they need to be “disposed of”. They are abandoned and left to die of thirst or starvation, or taken out the back and executed. I have seen this with my own eyes.
Do you know who these smugglers really are?

They are armed criminals. Chaos in Libya means that there are more armed militias than one can count, and many of them either directly engage in smuggling or “tolerate” it on the territories they control for a certain fee. I spent several weeks being hurled around in Libya. What I know is that these were Libyans, and thugs of the worst kind. Their racism against Blacks is abhorrent (apart from Sudan, most migrants who attempt to go through Libya come from West Africa): the insults, the beatings… one is left without dignity. Women are almost systematically raped, they too get shot if they resist.

Eventually, you made it out of this nightmare and onto the boat.

Yes. This is the last and most dangerous part of the journey. The “boat” in question is not really a boat, nor is it meant to return. It is a cheap, barely floating device that they overcrowd with migrants. Often it capsizes before it even sets off.

In my case, a fellow migrant was tasked with driving the boat, so there were no smugglers on board. Of course we cannot hope to reach the Italian coast in these conditions, so we set off and drifted at sea until the Italian coast guards picked us up and took us to Sicily. We were very lucky. I know that many drift for days on end and end up drowning.

Why Europe?

The Italian judge asked me the same question! She wanted to know if I came to get handouts or benefits. I told her very simply that I and many others have knowingly risked our lives. We have crossed the Sahara and we have crossed the sea, and we did not do it to come beg for charity. All I want is a chance at a normal, dignified life. We do not ask for charity, only dignity. We can work, live here and lead normal lives like everyone else.

How are things going for you in France?

I am happy to be here, but the bureaucracy for asylum seekers is a nightmare. It’s like it was done on purpose to deter people from applying; I have been here since July 2016 and I still don’t know whether my application is rejected or approved. There is quite a large community of Sudanese asylum seekers here and we get try to organise ourselves, sometimes with the help of NGOs and leftist activists. We try to organise and help each other out to adapt to life here, especially the formal aspects of dealing with the state. We also want to raise awareness about the crimes and corruption of the Sudanese regime that is causing the refugees to leave in the first place.

Asim Bahr Abyad is president of Sudanese Struggle for Freedom and an asylum seeker currently living near Paris. He is also known as Asim Mohammed Ahmed.
Trapped between terror and repression
Abeer Yehia

The Egyptian government insists that terrorist attacks are targeting all Egyptians regardless of their religion, but some Christians are beginning to challenge this narrative, after three attacks over the past six months have left more than 70 Christians dead, many of them children. “They are dead because they were Christians, Father. They are martyrs for Christ”, one man shouted in response to Bishop Agathon’s claim that the adults and children murdered by ISIS gunmen in Al-Minya province on 27 May were martyrs for their country, not their religion.

Since 2013 Christians experienced increasing hostility towards them, especially in Upper Egypt and Sinai. Many of the incidents were fights which quickly escalated into sectarian clashes. The beginning of 2017 marked a different phase, with a wave of suicide bombings targeting churches and mass killings. In February, hundreds of Christian families fled Sinai after being targeted by ISIS and several were killed. The tragic situation seemed to gain very little notice from the state and official media, while activist and opposition parties organized a convoy in solidarity with the displaced families and launched a campaign in solidarity.

The Palm Sunday attack on the other hand couldn’t go unnoticed or ignored. While Christians were celebrating the day, two suicide bombs in Tanta’s St George’s church and St Mark’s Coptic Orthodox Cathedral in Alexandria left more than 40 dead and 126 injured. The state hurried to declare a state of emergency right after the tragedy, with no clear plans or explanation how it will counter terrorism.

After the declaration of a state of emergency declaration, the crackdown on human right groups, activists and journalists continued under the banner of “fighting terrorism”. Just a few weeks later, a further terrorist attack took place, bringing more grief to Christians.

This time gunmen attacked a bus heading to monastery in Al-Minya province. They entered the bus confronted the victims, demanding that they recite the shahada, or confession of Muslim belief, or they will die. They then.

State discrimination creates climate for violence

Discrimination against Egypt’s Christians is enshrined in law, and legitimates sectarian violence against them. A law which places restrictions on the construction or renovation of churches has essentially remained in force since 1856. A new law passed in August 2016 does not lift the burden of discrimination from Egypt’s Christians. Church-building or renovation is often the pretext for violent sectarian protests. And when state security forces intervene to ‘mediate’, the result is often that Christians are forced to leave their homes and perpetrators are rarely brought to justice.

During 2011, mass mobilisations by Egyptian Christians were a central part of the revolutionary uprising, culminating in a major protest march calling for an end to discrimination and violence outside the state TV building in Maspero, central Cairo on 9 October. The demonstration was attacked by the army and security forces leaving 26 protesters dead.

Christians are also the target of violence attacks by other citizens or by groups opposed to the state. The absence of state intervention to protect Christians has been most obvious in Sinai. ISIS threats and the absence of protection from security forces led at least 300 families to flee. Under increasing pressure from independent news sources and civil rights groups, the state did finally move to provide homes and material support for the refugees.
Protests defy Sisi as sale of islands approved

Hundreds of protesters converged on the Journalists’ Union building in downtown Cairo on 13 June, as Egypt’s parliament prepared to discuss a the controversial decision by the military regime to sell the Tiran and Sanafir islands to Saudi Arabia.

Security forces stormed the building and seized at least six protesters, according to reports from Egyptian activists.

Well-known lawyer Khaled Ali, who is also the leader of the left-wing Bread and Freedom party, took part in the protest. Ali was one of a group of lawyers who challenged the decision to sell Tiran and Sanafir in court, winning a rare victory after a judge ruled that the sale would be unconstitutional. In a speech broadcast on Facebook, he said:

“We will defend Tiran and Sanafir as Egyptian, whatever the obstacles and challenges. Egyptian will remain free and independent.”

Ali is among many activists to have been recently targeted by the Sisi regime. He was summoned for questioning by police on 22 May. Many young activists from his Bread and Freedom party have been seized in dawn raids or summoned by the police for questioning in recent weeks. Local independent news website Mada Masr reports that activists from other parties and organisations including the Dostour Party, the Egyptian Social Democratic Party, the Revolutionary Socialists and the April 6 Youth Movement have also been targeted by the police in the recent series of raids.

The crackdown on opposition groups has also extended to the media. Independent news website Mada Masr was recently blocked by the Egyptian security forces and as the police assault on the Journalists’ Union unfolded, the Revolutionary Socialists said that the security forces had also forced their website offline.

Cement workers jailed for 3 years after sit-in

Security guards who took part in a sit-in to demand a contract after years of service with Torah Cement company were sentenced to three years in jail after a rushed, unfair trial in May this year. An appeal over their conviction was pending as Middle East Solidarity went to press, but this latest attack on workers’ rights has been seen by many activists in the labour movement as ominous confirmation that the Egyptian regime and its judges are determined to keep the lid on social protest through repression.

The dispute began earlier this year, when the security guards began a sit-in to protest at the Torah Cement company’s failure to honour their right to be taken on directly despite 10-15 years of daily service.

Workers’ patience with the company finally snapped after a guard was killed by robbers during a break-in at the company, leaving his family penniless and without even the money to pay for a funeral. Around 75 security guards set up camp inside the company premises and stayed there for 55 days, until the security forces stormed the protest and arrested dozens of workers.

Workers’ patience snapped when a guard was killed by robbers during a break-in. His family was left penniless.

On 3 June, 32 workers were sentenced to three years in jail, on charges of violent disorder and assaulting the police.

The case has sparked a strong reaction from trade unionists, activists and human rights groups across Egypt.

The General Union of Tourism Workers, the Egyptian Union of Oil Workers, the Union of Workers in the Spinning, Weaving, Garment and Leather Industries and the Permanent Congress of Alexandria Workers were among dozens of signatories to a solidarity statement released after the trial.

Turn to page 22 to find out more about international solidarity with the Torah Cement workers.
Around 100,000 demonstrators took to the streets of the Moroccan capital Rabat on 11 June in solidarity with the mass movement in the Rif region, following a crackdown by the authorities and the arrest of movement leaders.

The revival of mass protests in the capital follows months of demonstrations in the Rif raising a range of demands for political reform and social change.

The Rif movement exploded in October 2016 following the murder of Al Hoceima fish-seller Mohsin Fikri, who was crushed to death in the back of a bin lorry while municipal officials tried to confiscate his wares.

In the wake of Mohsin’s death, protests erupted across Morocco, linking issues of corruption, unemployment and social justice with the demands of the Rif’s Amazigh-speaking population for cultural, economic and social rights.

Over the winter, the movement outside the Rif retreated, while repression within the Rif intensified, perhaps reflecting the regime’s calculation that the protest movement had been contained and isolated.

Between 26 May and 31 May, Moroccan security forces rounded up 71 people following protests in the Rif’s regional capital, Al Hoceima and the neighbouring towns of Imzouren and Beni Bouayach.

Among those arrested was Nasser Zefzafi, an important protest leader from Al Hoceima. Lawyers for the detainees told Amnesty International they saw signs of beatings on their bodies, and that the prisoners had been insulted and in some cases threatened with rape.

A few days after their arrest, 31 of the detainees were transferred to Casablanca for interrogation, raising fears that they would be charged with state security or terrorism offences.

Despite the crackdown, protests in Al Hoceima continued to grow, with thousands turning out nightly. The Moroccan regime’s other tactics, including urging criticism of the protests from the pulpit in the city’s mosques, and a barrage of media attacks on the protesters as ‘separatists’ and ‘traitors’, failed to halt the rising tide of mobilisation.

Outside the Rif, the solidarity movement also surged ahead, with huge numbers joining the demonstration in the capital on 11 June.
Abuse of migrant workers remains at the heart of the 2022 World Cup project, despite promises of reform, reports Fabien Goa of Amnesty International

The main driver for the abuse of migrant workers in Qatar is the kafala, or sponsorship system. While versions of this system are found across the Gulf, Qatar’s is one of the harshest. All migrant workers have to have a sponsor who will almost always will be their employer, who as a result gains excessive power over their employees. Migrant workers are not allowed to change jobs without permission from their employer. They are unable to leave the country without an exit permit, and thus denied their human rights in terms of freedom of movement.

If workers leave their company without permission, employers can report them to the police as having ‘absconded’, which means the worker becomes undocumented, leaving them at risk of arrest and deportation. This system facilitates abuse, and forced labour is a major issue in Qatar.

Abuse of workers within Qatar itself has to be seen within the broader dynamics of labour recruitment in South Asia, South-East Asia and increasingly countries across Africa. Workers are often deceived about the terms of their work before they arrive. They turn up to find that they are being asked to do work which is different to what they expected or were offered at home, in dangerous or inhospitable conditions. They face arbitrary pay deductions, and their accommodation is often of a poor standard. However, when migrant workers try to challenge this or leave, the abusive side of the system is revealed. Existing legal protections are not effectively enforced, and access to justice is very limited and subject to arbitrary fees and extensive delays.

The numbers of migrant workers in Qatar are extraordinary. Qatar was awarded the 2022 World Cup in 2010, this has been seen as a lever to transform Qatar’s economy, society and international image. Since Qatar was awarded the World Cup its population has increased by at least 35 percent. In June this year, the total population hit 2.7m. With over 2 million foreign nationals in Qatar, migrant workers account for more than 90 percent of the workforce.

Currently the building boom connected with the World Cup bid means that most migrant workers are in the construction sector, although there are large number of migrant women domestic workers and increasing numbers of hospitality and transport workers. The blueprint for the delivery of the World Cup bid lays out plans for building at least seven new stadiums and the refurbishment of another, as well as the construction of a whole new city, Lusail. The planners have promised easy travel between venues for fans, and so there is a huge transport infrastructure project including motorways, railways and a new airport. Increased hotel capacity is also required.

Meanwhile, the problems faced by the migrant population of approximately 132,000 mostly female workers domestic workers predominantly from South Asia and Southeast Asia have not received the same international attention as those of male construction workers. If anything, they experience even harsher control by employers because this takes place within the private sphere, and their workplace is also their living place. They are excluded altogether from Qatar’s 2004 Labour Law which - at least on paper - provides protection for workers in terms of rights to days off and limiting working hours and thus are at an even higher risk of
Another sector which employs a large number of migrant workers is the tourism and hospitality sector. The construction boom is reaching its peak now, with the first World Cup stadium opening in late May this year, but as the other stadiums and transport links are completed, the demand for migrant workers will shift towards higher-skilled maintenance and engineering workers on the one hand and hotel workers and drivers on the other.

The kafala system essentially outsources government control of migrant workers to companies or individuals who request visas to bring in workers, which is the state issues. Once the visa is issued, the worker’s ability to depart or enter the country then rests with their employer, along with other methods of control. The companies involved include huge multinational construction and engineering firms from Europe, the Middle East and South and South-East Asia.

According to Qatari law, foreign construction companies operating in Qatar must generally establish a locally registered entity and must be 51 percent owned by the Qatari partner, so typically foreign firms will set up a joint venture with a Qatari company. Qatari partners may not necessarily be involved in the day-to-day running of these projects, however, often simply acting as local sponsors for the foreign company.

Companies use recruitment agents in Qatar and the sending countries. In June this year Amnesty published a report on abuses in the recruitment sector in Nepal. We found that migrant workers often sign a contract for a specific type of work and rate of pay, only to find that on arrival this is ripped up and they are handed another.

Recruitment fees are also a big issue. It is illegal under Qatari law to charge workers a recruitment fee, but this is not well enforced. Workers therefore end up paying the costs of their own migration, arriving indebted and thus more vulnerable to abuse by their employers. Those who have taken out loans to pay recruiters can get into a cycle of debt, which is exacerbated by the sponsorship system.

Even the third-party auditors hired by the Qatari World Cup Organisers, the Supreme Committee for Delivery and Legacy, recently found that the payment of recruitment fees is very widespread. In a report published in April 2017 they found that 79 percent of workers reported paying fees, and only six workers had been reimbursed for the fees as is their right under the Worker Welfare Standards which World Cup contractors are expected to abide by.

The Qatari government has brought in some reforms but these do not tackle the root causes of the problems. Qatar has introduced a Wage Protection System of electronic payments, which allows better monitoring of payments to workers but doesn’t solve the underlying issues of how workers can end up in situations of working for months without pay leaving them unable to buy food or save enough for a plane ticket home.

Qatar has repeatedly claimed to be abolishing the kafala system with the adoption of Law 21 of 2015. This came into effect with a lot of fanfare in December 2016. The reality doesn’t match with the rhetoric however, and the process looks more like a rebranding exercise than anything else. The word sponsor has disappeared from the new law, but there is a role with effectively the same powers, now labelled ‘recruiter / employer’.

Under Law 21, migrant workers still need their bosses’ permission to leave a job unless they complete a two year fixed term contract or after five years of service if they have an indefinite contract. Reports indicate that workers are still being required to obtain a “Non-objection Certificate” from their employer allowing them to move jobs.

The exit permit has not been abolished either, as a quiet amendment introduced at the start of the year, Law 1 of 2017, confirmed that migrant workers must first request permission from employers for leaving the country.

There is also a major regressive step in the new legislation. One major tool of coercion and control which employers use is passport confiscation although this has always been illegal under Qatari law. An academic survey in 2012 found that 90 percent of migrant workers were not in possession of their passport. The new sponsorship law, Law 21 of 2015, increases the penalty for passport confiscation, but waters down the existing legal protection by saying that migrant workers can agree to having their passport held by employer.

We often find that when we raise allegations of passport confiscation with companies, they respond by showing us a letter in Arabic with a thumbprint signature from a migrant worker, claiming this proves consent. This newly introduced loophole makes it harder to hold abusive employers to account for controlling and trapping their workforce by confiscating their passports.

The 2022 World Cup creates a strategic opportunity and also a potential source of leverage and pressure on the Qatari authorities to deliver substantive change. It is shocking that the world football governing body FIFA initially claimed that it has no responsibility for the human rights abuses taking place during the World Cup project.

FIFA is a huge commercial actor as well as a sports organisation, and has a responsibility to respect human rights. Millions of football fans will watch the 2022 and hundreds of thousands will travel to Qatar in 2022. We should be demanding that FIFA takes action and pushes for real reform to ensure that the World Cup is not built on the back of a disenfranchised and abused workforce.

Fabien Goa is an Advocate and Research Assistant in Amnesty International’s Refugee and Migrants Rights team.
The sacking of Aden governor Aidarous al-Zubaidi by the Saudi-based Yemeni president Abd Rabboh Mansur Hadi has triggered a mass mobilisation in the port city. Mirfat Sulaiman reports on how struggles for social justice are interwoven with the call for an independent South Yemen.

On 21 May, Khormaksar Square in central Aden was packed with tens of thousands of men, women and children who had travelled from across South Yemen. Despite the extreme heat, they celebrated with music and dance. Chants of “We support the Transitional Council of the South” and “Our aim is independence” rang across the square. The following day, 22 May, saw many people engaged in acts of civil disobedience, such as closing roads, followed by a candle-lit protest in the evening.

The huge protests followed weeks of mobilisation by supporters of Aden’s governor, Aidarous al-Zubaidi, who was sacked by President Hadi on 27 April. Hadi, who is based in the Saudi capital Riyadh, reportedly sees Al-Zubaidi as too close to the United Arab Emirates (UAE) which is a powerful military player in Yemen’s civil war.

The sacking of Al-Zubaidi has also exposed once again the historic rifts between North and South Yemen. His supporters rallied on 4 May, raising the slogan: “No regions. We all are with the leader Aidarous al-Zubaidi and the drive for independence.” Protesters travelled from as far as Hadramaut which is 400 miles away from Aden to join the rally. On 5 May, Al-Zubaidi announced the establishment of the ‘Southern Political Transitional Council’, a move widely seen as strengthening calls for the independence of South Yemen.

A week later the names of the council members were announced, including representatives from different districts among them women and young people. According to local journalist Saeed al-Batati, the names include the governors of Hadramout, Shabwa, Lahj, and Socotra, in addition to leading separatist figures and tribal leaders. President Hadi and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) have condemned the council’s formation. The formation of the Transitional Council is a major blow to Hadi’s shaky authority. He became interim President of Yemen in 2012 in an election where he was the only candidate, which was boycotted by the Southern independence movement.

In 2015 the Saudi Arabia-led coalition began its bombing campaign in support of Hadi’s Presidency and against Houthi forces, which captured the capital city Sanaa in September.
2014. In alliance with the former Yemeni President Ali Abdullah Saleh, Houthi forces invaded South Yemen, besieging Aden before being defeated by Saudi and UAE forces, with fighters from the Southern independence movement and local people playing a key role in driving them out of the city.

The retreat of Houthi forces has exposed the frustration of ordinary people in the South with Hadi’s corrupt regime. The city of Aden in particular has witnessed a wave of protests over issues such as power cuts, water supplies and other poor services.

Over the past few months the city has seen workers’ strikes and walkouts, marches, protests and civil disobedience (such as road blocks). These strikes and protests often intersect with Southern nationalist demands, fuelling calls for independence. Power cuts are a key issue for people in the city. Aden is equatorial in climate with high humidity and temperatures become difficult to bear without electric cooling.

There have also been protests over delays to pension payments, resulting in queues lasting through the night until the next day. One retired man was found dead waiting in a queue, which upset the city. There is also anger about the neglect of young wounded men who took part in defending the city and anger at unemployment and the rising prices for basic food.

Majed Aazan, a trade unionist at Aden’s Water Department told Middle East Solidarity that after a successful strike, tax office workers “won all their demands of unpaid wages, the workers celebrated their victory and sacked the corrupt manager and walked her out of the building chanting ‘leave’”. He told us that the Department of Water workers had called off their strike because of the fear of the return of the old corrupt management.

A new manager has since been appointed by Al-Zubaidi. “He stopped a lot of mischief and made a much simpler way to work. He cut the running cost of the diesel for the water pumps from around 600,000 riyal (£1870) by one third: we don’t know pumps from around 600,000 riyal running cost of the diesel for the water cooling.

January’s strike followed many spontaneous walkouts over the course of 2016 to apply pressure on bosses for unpaid wages. The strikes called for the payment of six months unpaid wages and they won all their demands. However, many workers have still not received their wages for March-July 2015, when Aden was under attack by forces allied to ousted President Saleh and the Houthi movement.

School pupils and university students have also been staging walkouts. In January this year, lecturers and students jointly rejected the sacking of the new principal of the Aden University Faculty of Education, 2016’s wages they had not received after the Central Bank refused to release the funds to pay them.

The strike brought the city to a standstill. Workers stopped all production and pumping of petrol and diesel, affecting the electricity supply as well as transport. A staff member at the refinery told Middle East Solidarity, “in December 2016 the union called for strike action for our unpaid wages. Aden’s Security Director General Shalaal came down to us and took our trade union reps to Aden’s Governor Aidarous Al-Zubaidi’s house. The reps explained to them that we hadn’t received two months of our wages, that is why we were on strike. They showed understanding and promised to sort it out, but they could not do so without direct intervention from President Hadi”.

Support for Al-Zubaidi and Shalaal within Aden has also been boosted by the fact that both were leading figures within Aden’s movement Al-Harak since 2007. Support for Al-Zubaidi and Shalaal within Aden has also been boosted by the fact that both were leading figures in the defence operation during 2015 war and are well respected by local people.

Many activists Middle East Solidarity spoke to in Aden had high hopes that the Transitional Political Council will change things for the better for ordinary people in South Yemen. But this will mean deepening and continuing struggles from below, rather than relying on leaders such as Al-Zubaidi to deliver change from above, or seeking support from the UAE and other Gulf states whose military interventions have devastated Yemen.
On Tuesday 23rd May, Bahrain’s security forces raided the village of Duraz, ending an almost-year long siege. The security forces shot and killed five people during the raid, and arrested up to 286 people. The five killed have been named as Mohammed Ali al-Sari, Mohammed Kadhem Mohsen, Ahmad Jamil Al-Asfour, Ahmed Hamdan and Mohammad al Ekri. Perhaps most tellingly, the raiding of Duraz happened immediately after Donald Trump’s visit to Saudi Arabia, highlighting how the new US/Saudi friendship, and its animosity towards Iran, is empowering the Bahraini regime to take an even harder line with dissent.

The siege of Duraz began in June 2016, shortly after the Bahraini courts removed the citizenship of Shaykh Isa Qassim, one of Bahrain’s most influential Shia clerics, and someone deemed to be the spiritual leader of the country’s now outlawed political society Al Wefaq. Making Isa Qassim stateless was a provocative move by the Bahraini government, especially given that the courts have failed to restore any credibility since the beginning of the Uprising in 2011. Since his denaturalization, peaceful sit-ins have been organized in the village of Duraz.

As a response to these sit-ins, the Bahraini government set up checkpoints around the village, allowing in only those whose ID listed Duraz as their residence. An internet curfew has also been introduced between 7pm and 1am, meaning residents could not use the internet between those times.

In addition to restricting the freedom of movement of both residents and non-residents, the siege has had enormous economic consequences. Bahrain Watch calculated that the internet curfew alone has run up a cost to residents of over £600,000. Meanwhile, local businesses, including supermarkets, salons and shops, have reported a drop in sales of almost 90 percent.

The collective punishment of Duraz residents worsened at the very beginning of 2017 with occasional violent incursions. In January 2017, at least 20 masked individuals dressed in civilian clothes entered Duraz and fired shotguns and 9mm rounds at civilians. A young Bahraini man, Mustafa Hamdan, was shot in the head with a 9mm round, and was left brain dead. He later died in hospital. Although the identities of the assailants was not clear, it is most likely the security forces. The amount and variety of arms suggest it was either the military or members of the royal family.

The Duraz assault cannot simply be attributed to a change of influence within the Bahrain administration. The first half of 2017 has been one of the most deadly in Bahrain’s history. It is no surprise that they have all coincided with the election of Trump, and not simply since his trip to Riyadh.

In January 2017, three young Bahrainis were executed after what was widely considered to be an unsafe trial for allegedly killing three policeman. Shortly afterwards, in February, the world media scarcely batted an eyelid when another three young men were shot at sea after escaping prison and allegedly trying to flee towards Iran. Added to this tragic tally was Abdullah Al Azjooz, 22, who allegedly died while attempting to escape from police, also in February.

The five Duraz deaths seem to follow the same worrying pattern: of young men being killed with...
What lies behind Gulf rivalries?

Anne Alexander

They are both conservative Sunni monarchies in the Gulf and staunch allies of the US. One hosts the biggest US military base in the Middle East, the other is one of the world’s most voracious consumers of US arms, military technology and training.

Why are Qatar and Saudi Arabia at loggerheads?

Qatar has long sought to carve out a path for itself across the region’s political and economic landscape which is distinctive from, and sometimes diametrically opposed to, that of Saudi Arabia. That has meant taking a friendlier line towards Iran than the Saudis want, offering support to Islamist movements such as the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood and Hamas, and funding the Al-Jazeera media network which irritates Riyadh with its willingness to give airtime to dissident voices and report on popular protest movements.

There is real economic substance to Qatar’s challenge. Its economy has grown from $8.1 billion in 1995 to $167 billion in 2015. In 1995 the Saudi economy was roughly 17.5 times the size of Qatar’s, whereas today it is only four times as big. Much of this growth is fuelled by Qatar’s access to Liquified Natural Gas (LNG) fields, which have reduced the emirate’s dependency on Saudi pipelines to export its natural wealth.

For the Saudis, Qatar’s new-found wealth poses a threat to the regional alliances it is building to confront Iran. Despite the integration of the Gulf economies, this row is a sign that competition among them can easily spill over into conflict.

The fact that the GCC states are armed to teeth by the US, increases the risk that diplomatic rows will translate into more military conflicts in a region already devastated by war.

Marc Owen Jones is a researcher at Bahrain Watch and Gulf Research Fellow at the University of Exeter.
Resistance is still fertile in Palestine

In the wake of a mass hunger strike by prisoners in Israeli jails, Palestinians are becoming increasingly impatient with their political leadership’s promises that further negotiations will deliver justice. Abdulwahab Sabbah reveals a mood of solidarity and defiance on the West Bank.

The whole community, including our political prisoners was disappointed in the Palestinian political leadership because we did not see them make any serious moves towards winning the demands of the prisoners during their hunger strike. Our leaders seemed to be simply too busy with their own affairs.

However on the streets every day we heard about clashes with the Israeli army. In the last two weeks of May, there were four young people who were killed by the Israeli army while trying to support the Palestinian prisoners inside jail. Every town and city and refugee camp had set up a solidarity tent, visited by hundreds of people every day, who sat there discussing the issue of the prisoners, trying to send a clear message, a message of solidarity.

Every house in Palestine is affected by Israel’s collective punishment of the prisoners and we saw many of the their relatives - mothers, wives, fathers, beginning their own hunger strike in solidarity with their loved-ones inside jail. By the end of May, the situation on the ground was boiling, and every day there were clashes with the Israeli army. I live in a town which is around 3km East of Jerusalem, cut off from Jerusalem by the wall. We have an Israeli military camp inside our town, every night during the strike there was tear gas and shooting. The number of people arrested by the Israelis in night invasions of their homes also increased.

The question of the hunger strike became the issue for Palestinians. As there are around 6500 Palestinian prisoners in Israeli jails, it affected nearly every house, every town, every refugee camp inside Palestine. Most Palestinian prisoners are being held inside Israel, making it impossible for the majority to have visitors.

You sometimes find whole families inside jail: father, mother and brothers. The Israelis have their own system which can send you inside jail for a long time, even without clear evidence. Under the system of administrative detention prisoners can be held for many years on the basis of what they call secret files. Neither the lawyer, nor the prisoner, or the international organisations like the Red Cross have the right to see the files or to be able to tell what are the charges against the prisoner.

Often they release a prisoner, and before even reaching his house he will be re-arrested. I saw these cases myself as an ex-prisoner who also spent time in Israeli jails. I was arrested seven times at the end of the 80s and the beginning of the 90s, and I know exactly how the prisoner will feel when this happens.

The political parties, from the left-wing, to Fatah, Hamas, Islamic Jihad, have been part of the solidarity movement for the prisoners. Inside the solidarity tents you would find leaders from these organisations and also prisoners who had been recently released continuing their hunger strike.

In my own view, the top leadership of all the political parties - with the exception of those who are either inside jail or involved in the struggle on the ground - aren’t doing enough to support their people. Israel is not respecting any of the deals and the agreements it made with the Palestinian political leadership, represented by the PLO.

Some of the prisoners were in jail before the Oslo Agreement was signed,
and according to Oslo they were supposed to be released. The Palestinian Authority should take serious moves by stopping security coordination with the Israelis and stopping negotiations. Instead we had the meeting between Trump and Abbas, which took place in complete isolation from people on the ground.

Let’s go back 27 years ago and look at how these peace negotiations started. Everybody in Palestine now knows that it was started on a basis that Israel had support from the Americans and some of the Arab regimes while the Palestinians had nothing in their hands. Right from the beginning there was no equality in these negotiations. So all the circumstances were against us.

We believe that it is like a circle, where we start with negotiations, then conferences, then peace agreements, then everything will collapse and we will return to point zero and continue.

The only facts we can see on the ground, is that we are losing more and more lives from Palestinian innocents who are being killed by the Israeli army at checkpoints or during the wars against Gaza and the West Bank, and there are more settlers come and more settlements will be built.

Our leadership can’t see that, and unfortunately their focus is on the promises that they had from the President of the United States talking about refreshing the economy. Yet everybody living in Palestine, whether in the West Bank, or in Gaza which is part of the Occupied Territories, can see the difficulties and the obstacles which the Israelis are putting in our way. People do not have the chance to progress, to work, they do not even have access to basics like education. Nobody has any hope that anything will come out of these peace negotiations.

In addition we see the leaders of the Palestinian Authority and Hamas playing games. I don’t think that the Palestinian Authority’s cuts in the salaries of employees working in Gaza, or cuts in necessary services like electricity will affect the leadership of Hamas. They are benefitting from this division, controlling the people in Gaza against their will, and they don’t have a clear vision for what they can offer people in the future.

Meanwhile, the West Bank is suffering a serious water crisis, thanks to the Israelis. However, our leadership in Ramallah did not want to declare that the Israelis are denying us access to water to punish us and push Palestinians out of their land. I reject the idea that the political conflict between Fatah and Hamas is what divides Palestinians, because if you look at the map of Palestine, Gaza and the West Bank have been divided since 1948.

The last time I managed to go to Gaza myself was in 1986, and there was no Hamas at that time. It was the Israelis who were in control, and in order to reach Gaza from the West Bank you had to either go to the Israelis and get permission from them, or if they refused you could go through the region. We used to go to Jordan and then to Egypt to enter Gaza if the Egyptians allowed us. Now that is impossible.

The silent majority in Palestine does not believe that there can be peace through the political channels that we have now. Everybody now is shouting for their rights as human beings. The idea that there can be two states in Palestine is a joke.

After 25 years of peace and negotiations, the number of Israeli settlers inside the West Bank has doubled. It used to be 230,000, now we are talking about over 600,000 settlers. Also inside 1948 Palestine we have more than 1.2 million Palestinians. What will be the future for these people? No division into two states can give all of these people their rights to live according to their own will. So you can’t just draw a line on a map or build a wall in between and say that these are the borders.

While Israel has a strategy to destroy the Palestinian community and to kick Palestinians out of their lands, most Palestinians are shouting now: ‘don’t divide us any more’. We are all Palestinians, whether in the huge camps around Palestine, or in the West Bank, or Jerusalem, or Palestine 48 and of course in Gaza. We hope that in the near future there will be a real movement which unites all the Palestinians, and I am not talking about the political parties.

Our message to all the world is that the Palestinian people deserves better and the main way we can win our land back is by fighting for our human rights. We must try to break the radical Israeli regime on the other side of the wall by working from inside, not through endless political processes without any strategy, which mainly benefit our leaders and not the people.

Abdulwahab Sabbah is a human rights activist in Abu Dis, near Jerusalem.
Across the media spectrum, from newspapers to websites and social media, Sisi’s military regime continues to stifle free speech, says Aya Nader.

Listen only to me” - Even if he had tried, Egyptian President Abdel Fattah El Sisi could not have described his authoritarian military reign better. Exactly one year since he demanded the people not believe the “enemies of the nation”, the margin for freedom of speech and expression has progressively shrunk to absurd levels.

On 17 March 2017, government sponsored candidate Abdel-Mohsen Salama became the head of the journalists’ syndicate. Salama is the managing editor of state owned Al-Ahram newspaper, and at the top of his list of supporters is former National Security officer Ahmed Mousa, a notorious mouthpiece for the regime who was supposedly intentionally planted in Al-Ahram. This recent development forecasts even darker times for an already gloomy era.

The militarization of politics as well as authoritarianism are suffocating the people of Egypt. Public spaces are slowly but surely being securitized as the media is co-opted. The economy is being divided like a pie to a select few, as a number of business tycoons and regime loyalists strategically buy out firms and distribute them among military men and their associates.

Falling in line with this clampdown, assets of Mostafa Sakr, owner of Daily News Egypt, Egypt’s only English independent daily print newspaper, and Arabic financial newspaper Al Borsa, were frozen.

Sakr has been accused of belonging to the Muslim Brotherhood terrorist organization. Although handed out abundantly, the accusation was even more ridiculous this time, as the regime had previously used the newspaper to seek out investors for its mega projects. It seems hypocritical, to say the least, to then accuse the owner of the very same newspaper of being affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood. “President Sisi to Daily News Egypt” read the front page of an August 2014 issue.

The freeze order coincided with parliament passing a media “regulations” bill, which gives the government total control over both state and private owned media outlets. The new law stipulates the formation of three regulatory bodies to oversee all of Egypt’s media outlets, be it public or private. Heads of these bodies are appointed by none other than the president himself, according to Article 32.

“The new law opens the door for the executive authority to dominate media,” Yehia El Qallash, ex-head of the Press Syndicate, told me. The state is refraining from building trust, he added, asserting that the current situation does not champion freedom of expression, and that of the press.

However, Qallash has more to worry about than the new law.

Qallash informed me that the syndicate had presented the Amnesties Council with a list of 29 imprisoned journalists, and 18 other journalists not imprisoned but under threat. Qallash is one of those 18 individuals under threat as well as the head of the syndicate’s Freedoms Committee, Khaled El Balshy.

Never has the syndicate head been tried and handed an imprisonment sentence in its 75 year history. Never has the syndicate HQ been stormed before, but both catastrophes took place under the Sisi regime. Qallash and El Balshy are accused of “harbouring fugitives”, namely journalists Amr Badr (also editor-in-chief of Bawabet Yanayer) and Mahmoud Al
Sisi’s war on journalism

Balshy told me, narrating how the media had a big role in exposing toppled President Hosni Mubarak’s regime, and overturning Mohamed Morsi’s.

Between killing and imprisoning journalists, a syndicate report stated that more than 782 violations were carried out in 2015 alone. The Committee to Protect Journalists named Egypt the third country in the world with the highest number of jailed journalists in 2016.

The sad truth remains that if you are not a government mouthpiece, you are in danger. While the state punishes journalists for doing their job, many behind bars are being granted international awards, including Ismail Alexandrani and Mahmoud Shawkan.

Until these shackles are broken, those holding dearly to the essence of their profession will have to continue shouting “journalism is not a crime.”

This article was first published on Open Democracy, 20 March 2017. CC-BY-NC. Go to www.opendemocracy.net to read more by Aya Nader.
SUDAN’S CREATIVE FORCES ON DISPLAY

Alice Finden reviews an interdisciplinary art exhibition at P21 Gallery in London

Sudan: Emergence of Singularities brings together pieces of work by young and old artists living in Sudan, the UK and Europe that cover a wide range of creative disciplines, from graphic art, painting and filmmaking, to pottery, interior design and sculpture. Curator Frederique Cifuentes tells me “I wanted to surprise the audience with this exhibition. People don’t really know anything about Sudanese art, and by coming here they have a better knowledge of the country, and also of the creative forces.”

For Cifuentes, creating a balance between young and more established artists was extremely important. Work by pioneers of the Sudanese art world, the late Mo Abbaro and Hussein Shariffe, is well placed among pieces from a younger generation of creatives.

Mo Abbaro is famous for his ceramics and pottery work and he taught at Camden Arts Centre in London for two decades. His bubble edged, spherical creations take the form of orb-like pots and sometimes of animals in turquoise and pink. Hussein Shariffe also spent time in the UK, and his wonderful paintings that showcase intricate juxtapositions of colour have been exhibited here. Shariffe also turned to filmmaking in the 1970s.

Some of the work touches on the violence and conflict that has become almost synonymous with Sudan and Darfur over the past couple of decades. An artistic film by the Sudanese Film Group touches upon this topic without dialogue: a mother loses her children, however we see no violence. There is no obvious end to the film, and Cifuentes tells me that it is “up to the audience to decide if the mother found her kids or not”.

Conflict is not the main focus of the exhibition, however, and there is such a diversity in art discipline, generation, location and gender that the installation speaks to many different conversations. For example, interior designer Akram Fathi’s work specifically offers a reflection on the theme of contemporary housing architecture in Khartoum.

Fathi’s work provides an insight into the lifestyle of Khartoum’s ‘nouveau riche’ class that appeared after 1989, who often receive remittances from family members working abroad. Photographs of Fathi’s work mainly show large and extravagant houses what one might recognise as a traditional Sudanese style, accompanied by chromes, golds and sparkles to give a modern finish.

The exhibition also features work by Kamala Ishaaq who is a leading woman artist. The spirituality of Ishaaq’s work is influenced by Zar, a female cult of spiritual possession indigenous to central Sudan, and also by the works of William Blake. In the 1970s and 1980s, she used such influences alongside expressions of feminism to create pieces of work that distinguished her from her contemporaries, who largely focused on Islamic imagery. In 1978 Ishaaq established the crystalists, an artistic movement whose vision was to move towards European and international aesthetics. Crystalist paintings often contained distorted human faces trapped within clear cubes or spheres, and you can see this within Ishaaq’s paintings.

Sudan: Emergence of Singularities is intended to be “a tribute to the vitality and diversity of a country and its people who deserve a brighter tomorrow”. The exhibition is now finished, however Cifuentes will be back to curate again next year. It will be well worth a visit.

Turn to page 2 for more on the exhibition and P21 Gallery

Kamala Ishaaq founded the crystalist artistic movement. Photo: Frederique Cifuentes
The week long Stop the Arms Fair protest will take place again this 12-15 September 2017 outside the Excel Centre in London. The protest takes place every second year to oppose the DSEI arms fair. “The World Leading Defense and Security Event” brings military weapon traders and business people together with some of the most powerful international government officials every second year, and helps to arm corrupt governments, and fuel some of the largest human rights atrocities.

Tom Barns, a Spokesperson for Stop The Arms Fair told us that “the impact of the deals made at DSEI are felt by civilians in imperialist wars, the repression of pro-democracy movements, and the militarised policing of borders across the globe.”

DSEI last took place in September 2015, and featured 1,500 arms traders from around the world and was met with daily blockades and creative protests. Campaign Against Arms Trade (CAAT) takes part in organising the protests and want to make the 2017 protest bigger than even, aiming to shut down the arms fair. “The weapons sold here fuel the death, destruction and injustice perpetrated by militaries, police forces and at borders around the world.” We should protest it “because those who torture protesters, brutalise indigenous people and murder civilians are on the guest list… because public services are cut but there’s always money for war… and because war, repression and injustice start here.”

In 2015, the event saw 14 countries with authoritarian regimes attending, including Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Bahrain. Four of the attending countries, Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, Iraq and Colombia, were identified by the UK government’s 2014 Human Rights and Democracy report as having wide-ranging human rights concerns. Finally, six of the countries were at war. According to CAAT, Israel was not officially invited to the 2015 fair, however the country has had some presence at both 2015 and 2013’s events. Eight activists were arrested for taking action at the 2015 arms fair, and were happily found not guilty in May 2016, “on the grounds of trying to prevent a greater crime”.

Isa al-Aali, a Bahraini granted asylum in Britain, was one of those eight. At the time, al-Ali told the Guardian “the fact that the weapons which were used to kill and torture people in Bahrain and Saudi is something that the court has seen to be legitimate, that there are violations committed by these totalitarian regimes. My role in taking direct action was important in circumstances where legal remedies were exhausted.”

While multi-million pound deals are being made between politicians and arms dealers, governments are enforcing harsher austerity policies and cutting more from public services. Shockingly, these murderous deals are also subsidised by us, UK taxpayers, in the form of policing the fair and UK Trade & Investment’s Defence & Security Organisation. In 2015, the total number of police deployments was 2245 and the last divulged cost of policing was £4m in 2005.

Miriam Scharf is International Officer for Newham Teachers’ Association. She lives near to where the arms fair takes place. Miriam told us that “it is a continuing insult to people in Newham that we have this disgraceful event in our borough. Newham advertises itself as the place where people ‘live, work and play’, not as the place where weapons, whose only purpose is destruction of human life, are bought and sold. We are a very multicultural community with a high proportion of Muslims. People in Newham are very aware these arms are used against civilian populations of largely Muslim countries. Outside the DESI in 2015 there were successful protests against arms to Israel. Hopefully this year we will show in even greater numbers our disgust at the contempt for democracy, human rights and peace shown by arms dealers throughout the world. We should especially target UK arms dealers and UK government deals.”

On its 2017 event website, DSEI states: “Advanced defence powers including the US and UK, GCC nations in the Middle East and other major European powers are seeking to upgrade their aerospace capabilities to new models such as the F-35...
Lightning II, Typhoon & Gripen.” These are examples of aircraft that have been bought from the UK by Saudi Arabia, and concurrently used in airstrikes in the Saudi onslaught in Yemen. The types of aircraft and Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAV or drones) sold at DSEi are also the same as those used by the US in its ever accelerating drone warfare program. The US has been using UAV to target Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsular (AQAP) for years, however the scale and quantity of strikes has increased exponentially since Trump’s inauguration. According to the Guardian, as of Trump’s 69th day in office the US had conducted 37 drone strikes or raids beyond declared battlefields, at a rate of one strike every 1.8 days. Obama had approved strikes every 5.4 days. According to data collected by the Bureau of Investigative Journalism, in 2017 alone, between 79-112 people have been killed by US strikes, a substantial number of whom were civilians. Often such strikes are being used to target people the US has placed on its “Kill list”. The UK also has a

Campaign reports | Arms Fair & Egypt

Kill list however is more covert about its use and stock of UAV. In challenging past DSEi arms fairs, Stop the Arms fair has held week long demonstrations including road blockades and workshops from many different groups including CAAT, Palestine Solidarity Campaign, Stop the War Coalition and War on Want. Tom from CAAT explained “we cannot let events like DSEI go unchallenged and that is why a huge and diverse movement is organising to shut the arms fair down for good. Whether you have known about the arms fair for a while or have only just heard of it, whether you have taken campaigning action before or not, whether you live in or outside London...we need as many people as we can to join the movement and show that we will not tolerate events that profit from violence and repression”.

Lecturers’ union congress discusses Egypt crackdown

The issue of forced disappearances and other human rights violations was high on the agenda at the annual congress of lecturers’ union UCU, held in Brighton on 27-29 May. The union pledged to continue support for the Truth for Giulio / Justice for Egypt’s Disappeared campaign in a resolution, while delegates heard a report back on a nation-wide series of meetings and events co-organised with Egypt Solidarity Initiative and Amnesty International at a well-attended fringe event.

“Following a series of well-attended campus meetings up and down the country, UCU members have reaffirmed their support for the Truth for Giulio campaign,” Rob Copeland, UCU’s International officer told Middle East Solidarity. “In conjunction with Amnesty UK and the Egypt Solidarity Initiative, we will continue to call for justice for all of Egypt’s Disappeared and an end to torture and impunity in Egypt.”

Amnesty’s director Kate Allen also addressed the full congress.

“Up and down our nations and regions Amnesty International student and local groups have come together with UCU branches to campaign on our campuses and in our communities. Progress in holding the Egyptian authorities to account is painfully slow, but progress is being made. Italian prosecutors have now identified a list of individuals that may be implicated in Giulio’s vile abduction and torture. There is no doubt that without your persistence and the insistence of

Amnesty supporters in Italy this crime would have been swept under the carpet, like so many others.”

Shane Enright, Amnesty UK trade union campaigner said:

“As we widen our campaign out to involve more union partners, we will insist on accountability from the authorities and an end to torture and impunity”.

Turn to page 22 to find out more about Egypt Solidarity Initiative’s current campaigns.
Solidarity with Torah Cement workers

Workers at the Torah Cement company in Egypt are the latest to face repression for daring to demand their rights, after 32 workers were given 3 year jail sentences for taking part in a sit-in calling for contracts with the company after years of casual work there as security guards.

As a statement signed by Egyptian trade unionists and activists notes: “The sentence was issued only 15 days after the workers’ arrest and their sentencing, and the judge’s bias was made clear when he declared he was convinced that demonstrations and strikes should be “forbidden and criminalised”! All of this means this was anything but a fair trial.”

Read more on page 7.

What you can do:
Sign the statement in solidarity with the workers online here: www.egyptsolidarityinitiative.org/torahcement

BDS Movement

Ten years since its launch, the BDS (Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions) movement for Palestinian rights is now strongly supported by major civil society organisations from across the world and has achieved significant impact.

However, Israel is now launching a desperate and dangerous fight back. At Israel’s request, governments in the US, UK, France, Canada and elsewhere are introducing anti-democratic legislation and taking other repressive measures to undermine the BDS movement.

Support the #RighttoBoycott and hold Israel to account for its violations of international law.

What you can do:
• For more information go to bdsmovement.net
• Help end British complicity in Israeli prisons through the Stop G4S Campaign here: bdsmovement.net/stop-g4s

Egypt arrests and disappearances

The Egyptian regime continues to target political activists and journalists, as this issue of Middle East Solidarity highlights. From the case of Alexandrian lawyer Mohamed Ramadan (pictured above and on the back page) to the crackdown on protests at the Journalists’ Union and the spate of arrests of opposition activists, the pressure from the security forces remains extremely high.

Meanwhile the struggle for justice continues for victims of forced disappearance such as Giulio Regeni, the Cambridge University PhD student who was kidnapped, tortured and murdered early last year. Lecturers’ union UCU and Amnesty International have worked together to organise a national campaign around UK universities calling for Truth for Giulio and Justice for Egypt’s Disappeared.

What you can do:
Go to amnesty.org.uk/giulio for resources and information on the Truth for Giulio campaign

Find out more on threats to freedom of expression and research in Egypt at www.afte.org

Go to www.egyptsolidarityinitiative.org for information on current appeals for political prisoners in Egypt
Bahrain Watch
bahrainwatch.org
Bahrain Watch is an independent research and advocacy organisation formed in February 2012 that seeks to promote effective, transparent and accountable governance in Bahrain.

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

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

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Go to www.menasolidaritynetwork.com/MEScontributors
An Alexandrian lawyer who defended families evicted from their homes by greedy property developers and striking workers has been sentenced to ten years in jail on ‘terrorism’ charges. Award-winning lawyer and former political prisoner Mahienour el-Massry urges solidarity with Mohamed Ramadan.

On 12 April 2017 an Egyptian court sentenced human rights lawyer Mohamed Ramadan in absentia to 10 years in prison, followed by five years’ house arrest during which he will be banned from using the internet. In June he was arrested and told he is facing new charges in another case relating to organising protests. But who is Mohamed Ramadan and why was he given such a harsh sentence?

In 2008 Mubarak’s regime started a wave of evicting people from their houses to make way for demolition, followed by new property investments by business tycoons and the military. One day poor people in the district of Touson in Eastern Alexandria woke up to find bulldozers demolishing the flats which they had saved for years to buy, and heard police with dogs storming the buildings to force the residents out. Local people resisted and pushed the police back, but they needed a good lawyer to help them with the court case.

Some of the residents chose Mohamed Ramadan to help them along the legal path and to represent them in court. He wasn’t politically active or a member of a political group, but he knew by instinct that the ruling laws are the laws of the ruling class and he knew that the ruling class is the main enemy of the people. He was convinced that mobilising people was the only chance for them to get their land back, and that protests would surely have a positive effect on what happened in court. At his suggestion, the people of Touson formed their own committee which mobilised residents to protest in front of the governorate headquarter in Alexandria and then to organise a sit-in for over 100 days in Cairo.

This monitored by the police and they knew that Mohamed Ramdan was involved in the movement so he was arrested, only to be released after a short while because of the pressure from the residents.

Ramadan’s point of view towards the regime progressively radicalised, until he became one of the most well-known activist lawyers in Alexandria. On 25 January 2011 he joined the protests but the police didn’t want him to be in the streets, so on 28 January he was arrested just outside his house and then the following day. After the revolution he started to be more active, joined all the protests against the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces, and all the presidents who followed Mubarak: Mohamed Morsi, Adly Mansour and Abdelfattah al-Sisi. His role wasn’t restricted to joining the protests: he worked a volunteer to represent huge numbers of protesters in court.

The current case against Ramadan originally began with his referral to the criminal court on charges of inciting terrorist attacks, endangering lives and public property, threatening national unity, and preventing authorities from carrying out their duties. He was also accused by the prosecution of creating a Facebook account with the aim of spreading extremist ideologies and inciting terrorist attacks. Ramadan was tried under the 2015 counter-terrorism law, which despite its name has nothing to do with fighting terrorism and is in reality a tool to silence any kind of peaceful opposition.

Mohamed Ramadan is 41 years old and father of three children. He never put his interest before his principles and this is why he is paying a heavy price. Solidarity with him is not only a revolutionary duty but also a humanitarian one against a dictator who committed brutal massacres and who is willing to take revenge on all who dreamt of bread, freedom and social justice.

Mahienour el-Massry is Mohamed Ramadan’s defence lawyer. She was jailed by the Sisi regime in 2015 and won the Ludovic-Trarieux Prize while serving her sentence. Find out more on page 22.