

UK's PM Cameron talks "democracy" while peddling arms to Gulf despots

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British Prime Minister David Cameron made headline news Monday, as the first world leader to visit Egypt since President Hosni Mubarak was ousted.

Cameron arrived in Cairo as revolutionary contagion spread across the Middle East and North Africa. His visit, the British media claimed, was intended to show solidarity with the people's demands for democratic changes. In keeping with Britain's long alliance with the Mubarak dictatorship, and its own colonial history in Egypt, it involved nothing of the sort.

Egypt had not been on the itinerary for Cameron's three-day tour of Gulf States that was aimed, for the most part, at boosting British arms sales in the region. The UK leads the field in weapons sales including fighter jets, submachine guns, electric batons and teargas, and is seeking to preserve its position against growing competition from European arms exporters.

Accompanying the prime minister on his tour is a 36-strong trade entourage comprising a significant number of representatives from Britain's defence and aerospace sectors—including BAE Systems, Rolls Royce and the Cobham Group. According to reports, one of the key trade deals is expected to be agreement on the sale of Eurofighter Typhoon jets.

The sight of the British prime minister peddling arms, including civil disorder weaponry, to Gulf despots at this time was not considered politic. Only at the weekend, the government had been forced to revoke a limited number of arms export licences to Bahrain and Libya after reports that UK armaments were being used to violently suppress protestors. Egypt was included at the last moment, and a six-hour stopover added in Cairo, in large part to disguise the real objective of Cameron's visit to the region. Cameron's real "solidarity" is reserved for the military junta and its counterparts.

"This is a moment of great opportunity for Egypt," he said. "Our message, as it has been throughout this, [is] that the response to the aspirations that people are showing on the streets of these countries must be one of reform and not repression."

His statement was in marked contrast to those made when the Western ruling elite still believed, and hoped, that Mubarak would be able to stay the course. Even after the state-orchestrated attacks in Tahrir Square, Cameron had avoided any suggestion that Mubarak should go, calling for restraint on "both sides" and speaking vaguely of the need for a "transitional process" for reform.

The real attitude of the British bourgeoisie to the dictator was made plain by former Labour Prime Minister Tony Blair, who described Mubarak as a "force for good" and warned that there should not be a "rush to elections".

The army that took over the country on February 11 appears to be in no rush to implement the reforms it has promised. In Cairo, Cameron met Field Marshal Mohammed Hussein Tantawi, minister of defence under Mubarak and head of the armed forces supreme council. Tantawi had repeatedly issued instructions for an end to the protests and strikes that continue to sweep the country. No moves have been made against Mubarak, who is currently holed up in Sharm el Sheikh.

Figures from the Campaign Against the Arms Trade (CAAT) show that the UK sold £16.4 million worth of arms to Egypt in 2009, including surveillance equipment and components for semi-automatic pistols and submachine guns.

Simultaneous with Cameron's tour, Defence Minister Gerald Howarth was attending an arms fair in Abu Dhabi involving a large number of British firms and

backed by the UK Trade & Investment Defence & Security Organisation and ADS, the UK's arms trade body.

Speaking in Kuwait Tuesday, Cameron stated blandly, "For decades some have argued that stability required highly controlling regimes and that reform and openness would put that stability at risk."

Britain should "acknowledge that sometimes we have made such calculations in the past", he said.

Nevertheless, Cameron was at pains not to offend the ruling emirs, stating only, "There is no single formula for success and there are many ways to ensure greater, popular participation in government."

"The evolution of political and economic progress will be different in each country," he said.

His remarks are cynical. The British bourgeoisie did not simply "argue" in favour of "highly controlling regimes". They actively encouraged, facilitated and supplied such dictatorships with the means of repressing their populations. According to CAAT, since 2003 Britain has approved 1,155 arms export licences for Kuwait, worth £102.3 million.

The use of such weaponry has been on display over the last weeks in Bahrain and Libya. In the last year, the UK approved "crowd control ammunition" and teargas to these countries.

Foreign Secretary William Hague claims there is "no evidence" that the security forces in Bahrain had used British products in their efforts to violently subdue the protests. But it is little more than a fortnight since Hague himself was in Bahrain where all power is concentrated in the hands of King Hamad bin Isa al-Khalifa and his uncle, Prime Minister Sheikh Khalifa bin Salman al-Khalifa, who has been in the post for almost 40 years.

Speaking in the Bahrain capital Manama on February 10, Hague said he had had "very productive discussions about foreign and security issues in the Middle East, where Britain and Bahrain have many common interests and indeed many common opinions and approaches."

The capital has since been the scene of mass protests, centred around Pearl Square, and bloody repression. In addition to tear gas and crowd control ammunition, the UK had licensed stun grenades, assault and sniper rifles and submachine guns for export to Bahrain.

The double-dealing of the British bourgeoisie is even

more apparent in the case of Libya. It is just seven years since Blair's infamous "deal in the desert" with Muammar Gaddafi. In return for Libyan aid in the supposed "war on terror", i.e., support for imperialist intervention in the Middle East, Blair cleared the way for billions in British business deals.

The arrangement was cemented with the release of Abdelbaset al-Megrahi, convicted of the 1988 bombing of Pan Am Flight 103 over Lockerbie, Scotland. Just six weeks after he returned to Libya, British oil giant BP secured a £15 billion oil and gas exploration deal in Libya. Exports to the country have since doubled, with 150 British firms involved in the country, including Marks & Spencer, Shell, Land Rover, and HSBC.

UK arms sales have also benefitted. Exports include wall and door breaching projectile launchers, teargas and water cannon. Once again these have been used to deadly effect in Libya, claiming hundreds of lives and injuring thousands more.

Algeria and Saudi Arabia are other "hot spots" for British arms manufacturers.

The UK also helps buttress the Middle East regimes by aiding in the training of their security and armed forces. The UK's National Policing Improvement Agency works with the police in Bahrain, Libya, Abu Dhabi, Qatar and Saudi Arabia.

According to the *Guardian*, the Ministry of Defence had helped train more than 100 Bahraini military officers over the last five years at its military colleges, including Sandhurst. Its former students include Bahrain's King and Jordan's King Abdullah II, the Emirs of Kuwait and Qatar, the Sultan of Oman, the Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi and the Prince of Dubai.



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