

UAE pardons British PhD student Matthew Hedges on spying charges

By Paula Smith
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The United Arab Emirates' rulers granted British PhD student Matthew Hedges "gracious clemency." Just days earlier a court in Abu Dhabi sentenced him to life imprisonment on charges of espionage, following a five-minute court hearing that gave him no opportunity to offer a defence.

According to Attorney General Hamad al-Shamsi, Hedges was convicted on charges of "spying for a foreign country" and "jeopardising the military, political and economic security of the state." However, the UAE did not publish any evidence or even state on whose behalf Hedges was supposedly working, although this is widely assumed to mean Qatar, which the UAE—along with Saudi Arabia and other Gulf States—has been blockading for the last 18 months over its support for Iran and sponsoring "terrorism."

Hedges' fate provoked a diplomatic crisis for the British government that remained tight-lipped following his arrest and detention in solitary confinement in an Emirati jail last May, with little consular access or contact with family members. While a comparable case in Russia would have involved a furious outcry, the Foreign Office urged Hedges' family to say nothing in public about the case, claiming any publicity would impact adversely.

Hedges, 31, was brought up in the UAE and used to work for a security and political consultancy firm based there as an analyst. He had spent two weeks in Dubai researching the UAE's foreign and internal security policies for his PhD at Durham University. According to his wife, Daniela Tajeda, he was arrested last May as he was leaving Dubai and kept in such dreadful conditions that he was hospitalised at one point. Hedges has denied all accusations against him, but was made to sign a confession, written in Arabic, which he does not read.

Over 650 academics from British universities, many with campuses in Dubai, and internationally signed a petition—co-signed by Professor Clive Jones, Hedges' supervisor—calling for his release and saying that Dubai could not be regarded as a safe place for academics to work. Durham and Essex are among a number of universities that have severed ties with the UAE.

The American Political Science Association published a letter calling on the UAE to release Hedges and to "reaffirm the UAE's respect for academic freedom and freedom of expression."

The UAE routinely hands down long jail sentences to critics, dissidents and human rights activists, particularly after its bust-up with Qatar, when showing sympathy with its neighbour became punishable by up to 15 years in jail. Abu Dhabi has installed a vast surveillance system across the city that it purchased from an Israeli-owned security company to keep tabs on its citizens, migrant workers and tourists. The new Falcon Eye surveillance system "links thousands of cameras spread across the city, as well as thousands of other cameras installed at facilities and buildings in the emirate."

Nicholas McGeehan, a former Human Rights Watch researcher in the Gulf, told the Middle East Eye that the country had no independent judiciary. "It's a police state. You have these squads of people who operate completely outside the rule of law and snatch people off the street, snatch people out of airports, and disappear and torture them based on spurious allegations, or based on their background, or based on their associations that the UAE disapproves of."

The public outcry and the sham nature of the trial finally forced the British government to speak out. Foreign Secretary Jeremy Hunt said he was "deeply shocked" by the sentence, while Prime Minister

Theresa May said she was “deeply disappointed.” Hunt finally agreed to meet Tajeda for the first time since Hedges’ arrest in May, despite repeated requests.

Attorney General al-Shamsi responded by pointing out that the verdict against Hedges was not “final” and that he had 30 days to appeal the sentence. The next day, Hunt held “a constructive conversation” with Sheikh Abdullah bin Zayed, the UAE’s foreign minister, who said that his country hopes to find an “amicable solution... The UAE is determined to protect its important strategic relationship with a key ally.”

Hedges’ pardon came yesterday and was one of more than 800 remissions granted by the UAE during National Day when the UAE often grants such reprieves.

Speaking on the BBC’s Today programme last Thursday, Tejada said that the British did not want to upset their close ally. “I got the impression that they were putting their interests with the UAE above a British citizen’s rightful freedom and his welfare and his right to just a fair trial, just to freedom,” she said. “They were stepping on eggshells instead of taking a firm stance.”

The previous week, Baroness Rona Fairhead, the Minister of State for Trade and Export Promotion at the Department for International Trade, headed a delegation of 50 companies at the Abu Dhabi International Petroleum Exhibition and Conference in a bid to boost trade following Brexit. Britain exported goods, including weaponry, and services worth £11.1 billion to the UAE in 2017 and imported £7.4 billion. Not only is the UAE the region’s second largest purchaser of Britain’s non-military exports, it is host to more than 120,000 UK citizens who work there and is a key investor in Britain.

Fairhead said, “The UAE is the fifth largest trading partner for the UK outside Europe, coming after the US, Japan, China and Hong Kong, and bilateral trade is now growing in double digits. In terms of investment, we are the biggest foreign direct investor today in the UAE.”

The previous day, Hunt met Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed, Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi and Deputy Supreme Commander of the Armed Forces.

It is not just Britain’s economic relations with the UAE that are at stake. The UAE, which as a member of the Trucial States, was once under British “protection,”

plays a crucial role in American and British imperialism’s plans to undermine Iran and dominate the resource-rich region as “a long-established partner in security and intelligence matters.”

The UAE joined the NATO-led intervention to topple Colonel Muammar Gaddafi in Libya, where it continues to support the forces of General Khalifa Hiftar in the Benghazi region in opposition to the UN-recognized government in Tripoli. It financed, sponsored and trained proxy forces to overthrow the regime of President Bashar al-Assad, and leads the Saudi-sponsored war on the ground against the Houthi rebels in Yemen.

But it is increasingly, along with Saudi Arabia, pursuing its own interests that on occasion conflict with those of the imperialist powers—as evidenced by the bitter row with Qatar. The UAE’s Crown Prince Mohammed bin Zayed backed Saudi Arabia’s Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman during his rapid rise to power. Their joint opposition to the Muslim Brotherhood, shared by Egypt’s dictator, Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, has set them against Qatar and Turkey, which hosts Egyptian members of the Muslim Brotherhood and other Islamist exiles.

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