

August 29, 2023

The Honorable Antony J. Blinken
Secretary of State
2201 C Street, NW
Washington, DC 20520

Dear Mr. Secretary:

We, the undersigned organizations, write to you with deep concern over the continued detention and persecution of human rights defenders by the government of the United Arab Emirates (UAE), most notably Ahmed Mansoor, who received the prestigious Martin Ennals Award for Human Rights Defenders in 2015. **We urge you to call on the UAE government to immediately and unconditionally release Ahmed Mansoor. We urge you to make this call publicly and to raise it in your engagement with UAE officials at the highest levels.**

[Ahmed Mansoor](#) has faced repeated intimidation, harassment, and death threats from the UAE authorities and their supporters, and he was the victim of a [sophisticated](#) spyware attack by the Emirati government. When security forces raided his home just before midnight and arrested him on 20 March 2017, Mansoor was the last Emirati human rights defender still working openly in the UAE. Mansoor is also a member of the Gulf Centre for Human Rights Advisory Board and the Human Rights Watch Advisory Committee of the Middle East and North Africa Division.

According to the UAE's state news agency, authorities [arrested](#) Ahmed Mansoor for "[spreading false news](#)" to "harm the reputation of the state" in March 2017. All the charges on which he was convicted were based solely on his human rights advocacy, including using email and WhatsApp to communicate with [Human Rights Watch](#), Amnesty International, and other human rights organizations. Following more than a year in isolation in pre-trial detention and a [grossly unfair trial](#), an Emirati state security court sentenced him to 10 years in prison and fined him 1,000,000 Emirati Dirhams (around \$272,000).

Over the past six years, UN human rights experts as well as independent rights groups have [documented](#) how the UAE government has held Ahmed Mansoor in [solitary confinement](#) without access to reading materials, television, or radio. Since December 2017, he has been denied eyeglasses most personal hygiene items and, at least until recently, a bed or mattress in his cell. [These measures](#) violate the prohibition against torture and other cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment or punishment. UAE authorities deny that they have subjected Mansoor to such treatment, while refusing to allow independent observers to visit him.

Between November 30 and December 12, 2023, the UAE will host the 28th Conference of Parties of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (COP28). To create conditions that allow the conference to be successful in its goal of achieving ambitious and urgent climate action, the UAE, as the host, should signal its intent to facilitate an open COP28 in a free civic space. A meaningful step in that direction would be the immediate and unconditional release of Ahmed Mansoor from prison, while concurrently taking concrete steps to ensure that observer organizations attending COP28 are able to participate effectively, safely, and meaningfully.

Since 2011, the UAE has closed virtually all civic space in the country, with laws that criminalize peaceful expression, association, and assembly. At least 62 Emirati nationals, three of whom are human rights defenders, are currently arbitrarily detained in prison following unfair trials on politically motivated charges. UAE authorities [continue](#) to incarcerate at least 58 of these Emirati prisoners, even though they have completed their sentences. Most of these prisoners are part of the grossly [unfair](#) “UAE94” mass trial of government critics, which violated their human rights. UAE authorities are using baseless counterterrorism justifications for continuing to hold them past their completed sentences.

The release of Ahmed Mansoor and other human rights defenders and peaceful critics, including those held past their release dates, is a key first step to signaling that civil society will have the space to exchange ideas freely and safely, to promote government accountability, and to represent marginalized populations during the upcoming climate conference. This step is crucial to addressing the climate crisis.

We realize that U.S. relations with the UAE are multifaceted, including strategic military and political ties. Unfortunately, U.S. government’s attention to the UAE’s terrible human rights record has long been woefully lacking. As the world’s attention is on the UAE ahead of COP28, the US government has an important opportunity to press the Emirati government to take concrete steps to adhere to its human rights obligations and to underscore the importance of thriving, independent civil society to climate action. Specifically, we urge you to press the Emirati government to immediately and unconditionally release Ahmed Mansoor and other jailed human rights defenders and to pledge to respect and protect the rights to freedom of expression, peaceful assembly, and association of all participants from all nationalities before, during, and after COP28. We also urge you to signal your deep concern about Ahmed Mansoor’s well-being and request permission for the U.S. embassy in Abu Dhabi to visit him in prison at the earliest opportunity.

Sincerely,

1. Access Now
2. ALQST for Human Rights
3. Amnesty International USA
4. CIVICUS
5. Democracy for the Arab World Now DAWN
6. Emirates Detainees Advocacy Centre (EDAC)
7. Freedom House
8. Front Line Defenders
9. Gulf Centre for Human Rights (GCHR)
10. Human Rights First
11. Human Rights Watch
12. International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH) - within the framework of the Observatory for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders
13. Martin Ennals Foundation
14. MENA Rights Group
15. PEN America

16. Project on Middle East Democracy (POMED)
17. Stand up for the UAE detainees (SANID)
18. The Freedom Initiative
19. World Organization Against Torture (OMCT) - within the framework of the Observatory for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders

CC: Mr. John Kerry, Special Presidential Envoy for Climate
Ms. Erin M. Barclay, Acting Assistant Secretary Bureau of DRL
Ambassador Barbara Leaf, Assistant Secretary Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs