

Open Letter from Over 50 NGOs and Individuals to the UAE authorities



UAE: Freedom of expression must be upheld at all times, not only tolerated during Hay Festival Abu Dhabi

24 February 2020

As the Hay Festival Abu Dhabi opens on 25-28 February 2020 in the United Arab Emirates (UAE), we the undersigned call on the Emirati authorities to demonstrate their respect for the right to freedom of expression by freeing all human rights defenders imprisoned for expressing themselves peacefully online, including academics, writers, a poet and lawyers. In the context of the Hay Festival, the UAE's Ministry of Tolerance is promoting a platform for freedom of expression, while keeping behind bars Emirati citizens and residents who shared their own views and opinions. We support the efforts of festival participants to speak up in favour of all those whose voices have been silenced in the UAE. We further support calls for the UAE authorities to comply with international standards for prisoners, including by allowing prisoners of conscience to receive books and reading materials.

The country's most prominent human rights defender, **Ahmed Mansoor**, is currently serving a 10-year prison sentence after being convicted on the spurious charge of "insulting the status and prestige of the UAE and its symbols including its leaders" in reprisal for his peaceful human rights activism, including posts on social media.

Mansoor is being held in solitary confinement in an isolation ward in Al-Sadr prison, Abu Dhabi, in [dire conditions](#) with no bed or books. In the nearly three years since his arrest in March 2017, he has only been permitted to leave his small cell for a handful of family visits, and only once has he been allowed outside to the prison sports yard for fresh air. In protest, he went on two separate hunger strikes which have harmed his health - harm which has been exacerbated by the lack of adequate medical care. By holding Mansoor in such appalling conditions, the UAE authorities are violating the absolute prohibition of torture and other ill-treatment under international law. We urge the Emirati authorities to comply with international law and we appeal to the humanity of members of the government to provide Mansoor with acceptable conditions until he is released.

Mansoor, who has four young sons, is also an engineer and a [poet](#). He serves on the advisory boards of the Gulf Centre for Human Rights (GCHR) and Human Rights Watch's Middle East division. In

October 2015, Mansoor gained international recognition for his vital work when he received the [prestigious Martin Ennals Award](#) for Human Rights Defenders.

Mansoor undertook a month-long hunger strike in March 2019 to protest his punitive prison conditions, arbitrary detention, and unfair conviction. In May, seven United Nations independent experts [expressed grave concern](#) about Mansoor. Again, in early September 2019, after being tortured through beatings by prison guards, he began a second hunger strike. Due to the lack of independent human rights NGOs in the country, it is very difficult to obtain news about his current situation, including whether or not he remains on the hunger strike since the last report that he was still [not eating](#) solid food in January 2020, leaving him unable to walk.

In October 2019, over 140 NGOs worldwide [appealed](#) to the UAE authorities to free Ahmed Mansoor, who spent his 50th birthday in isolation and on hunger strike.

Other prisoners have been tortured in prison in the UAE. A Polish fitness expert, **Artur Ligęska**, was held in the same isolation ward as Mansoor, in conditions he [described as “medieval”](#). After [his charges were dismissed](#) and he was freed in May 2019, Ligęska wrote a book in which he recounted the prison conditions in Al-Sadr’s isolation wing, where prisoners were held without running water for many months in very unhygienic conditions, and some were [subjected to torture, abuse and sexual assault](#). He was instrumental in getting the news about Mansoor’s hunger strike out to the world from prison in March 2019, at great personal risk.

Other human rights defenders have faced similar mistreatment in prison, where they are often held in isolation, resorting to hunger strikes to try to bring attention to their unjust imprisonment and ill-treatment in detention.

Human rights lawyer [Dr Mohammed Al-Roken](#), who has been detained since July 2012 solely for peacefully exercising his rights to freedom of expression and association, including through his work as a lawyer, is serving a 10-year prison sentence for signing - along with 132 other people - an online petition calling for political reform. He was convicted and sentenced following a grossly unfair mass trial of 94 people (known as the “UAE 94” trial) including human rights lawyers, judges and student activists. Among them, was another human rights lawyer, [Dr Mohammed Al-Mansoori](#) who was also arrested in July 2012 and sentenced to 10 years in prison. Dr Al-Mansoori had [not been allowed to contact his family](#) for over a year, and was only permitted to do so recently. Both men are being held in [Al-Razeen prison](#), a maximum-security prison in the desert of Abu Dhabi, which is used to hold activists, government critics, and human rights defenders. They face arbitrary and unlawful disciplinary measures, such as solitary confinement, deprivation of family visits, and intrusive body searches.

Dr Al-Roken was a member of the International Association of Lawyers (UIA) and the International Bar Association, and both Dr Al-Roken and Dr Al-Mansoori served as president of the UAE’s Jurists Association before its arbitrary dissolution by the Emirati authorities in 2011. Dr Al-Roken has authored books on human rights, constitutional law, and counterterrorism. He dedicated his career to providing legal assistance to victims of human rights violations in the UAE, for which he was awarded the [Ludovic Trarieux International Human Rights Prize](#) in 2017. Over two dozen NGOs [called for his release](#) in November 2019.

Academic and economist Dr. **Nasser Bin Ghaith**, a lecturer at the Abu Dhabi branch of the Paris-Sorbonne University, was [sentenced on 29 March 2017 to 10 years in prison](#) for critical comments he made online about human rights violations in the UAE and Egypt.

In a [letter written from prison](#), Dr. Bin Ghaith stated that “the verdict proves that there is no place for freedom of speech in this country” and announced that he would begin a hunger strike until he was released unconditionally. He has also undertaken subsequent hunger strikes to protest conditions in Al-Razeen prison, including to demand his immediate release following the pardon of British academic **Matthew Hedges** on 26 November 2018, a week after he was sentenced to life in prison on spying allegations. Hedges was held, [mainly incommunicado and in degrading and inhuman conditions for seven months](#), until he faced an unfair trial on charges of spying for the United Kingdom government.

In October 2018, the European Parliament adopted a [resolution](#), calling on the UAE to, among other demands, stop all forms of harassment and immediately lift the travel ban against human rights defenders, and urging the authorities to “guarantee in all circumstances that human rights defenders in the UAE are able to carry out their legitimate human rights activities, both inside and outside the country, without fear of reprisals”.

The Hay Festival Abu Dhabi is supported by the UAE’s Ministry of Tolerance, in a country that does not tolerate dissenting voices. Regrettably, the UAE government devotes more effort to concealing its human rights abuses than to addressing them and invests heavily in the funding and sponsorship of institutions, events and initiatives that are aimed at projecting a favourable image to the outside world.

With the world’s eyes on the Hay Festival Abu Dhabi, we urge the Emirati government to consider using this opportunity to unconditionally release our jailed friends and colleagues, and in the interim, to at least allow prisoners of conscience to receive books and reading materials, to have regular visits with family, to be allowed outside of their isolation cells to visit the canteen or go outside in the sun. In particular, we ask that Ahmed Mansoor be given a bed and a mattress so that he no longer has to sleep on the floor, and that prison officials cease punishing him for public appeals that are made on his behalf. We ask the authorities to improve their prison conditions as a sign of goodwill and respect for people who wish to organise and participate in events in the UAE, such as the Hay Festival Abu Dhabi or the upcoming Expo 2020 Dubai, in the future. By doing so, the UAE would demonstrate that the Hay Festival is an opportunity to back up its promise of tolerance with actions that include the courageous contributors to freedom of expression who live in the country.

Signatories:

Access Now

Americans for Democracy & Human Rights in Bahrain

Amnesty International

Arabic Network for Human Rights Information

Association for Victims of Torture in the UAE

Bar Human Rights Committee of England and Wales (BHRC)

Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies (CIHRS)

Campaign to Free Latifa

CIVICUS

Committee to Protect Liberties and Human Rights in Tunisia

Detained in Dubai

Detained International

Electronic Frontier Foundation

European Center for Democracy and Human Rights

FIDH, in the framework of the Observatory for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders

Front Line Defenders

Gulf Centre for Human Rights (GCHR)

IFEX

International Campaign for Freedom in the UAE
International Centre for Justice and Human Rights
International Press Institute (IPI)
International Publishers Association (IPA)
International Service for Human Rights (ISHR)
Lawyers' Rights Watch Canada
Maharat Foundation
MENA Rights Group
No Peace Without Justice
Norwegian PEN
PEN America
PEN International
Project on Middle East Democracy (POMED)
Rights Realization Centre
Tunisian Association for the Defense of Individual Liberties
Tunisian League for the Defense of Human Rights
Tunis Center for Press Freedom
Vigilance for Democracy and the Civic State, Tunisia
World Organisation Against Torture (OMCT), in the framework of the Observatory for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders

April Alderdice, CEO MicroEnergy Credits
Fadi Al-Qadi, author and MENA human rights expert
Noam Chomsky, Professor
Ronald Deibert, Director of the Citizen Lab at the University of Toronto
Brian Dooley, human rights advocate
Drewery Dyke, human rights advocate
Jonathan Emmett, author
Stephen Fry, author and presenter
Ahmed Galai, Ex-Vice President of the Tunisian Human Rights League (member of the National Dialogue Quartet, co-winner of the Nobel Peace Prize 2015)
Melanie Gingell, human rights lawyer
Chris Haughton, author
Matthew Hedges, PhD candidate and former prisoner in the UAE
Bill Law, journalist
Artur Ligęska, Polish activist and former prisoner in the UAE
Danielle Maisano, novelist, poet and activist
Michael Mansfield QC, Barrister
Albert Pellicer, poet and lecturer
Simone Theiss, human rights advocate