

## Human Rights Defenders and Political Prisoners in Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Bahrain

### Ahmed Mansoor: Banned from Travelling Outside the UAE

Ahmed Mansoor is one of the few human rights defenders living in the United Arab Emirates who independently monitors human rights abuses within the country. He regularly raises the UAE's violations of international law, human rights, and rule of law. He has been jailed multiple times for his efforts and is currently banned from travelling abroad.

Mansoor began focusing on civil and political rights initiatives in the UAE in 2006 when he successfully campaigned for the release of two individuals jailed for voicing public criticisms of the authorities. His work focuses on freedom of expression, arbitrary detention, torture, due process, and judicial independence.

In 2011, in the wake of the Arab Spring protests, Mansoor was detained along with four other Emirati activists for supporting a petition calling for democratic reform. He was convicted for "insulting officials" but then released on a presidential pardon after eight months in prison. However, Mansoor remains banned from leaving the country and has been denied a passport, violating his right to freedom of movement.

#### **CLOSING CIVIL SOCIETY SPACE IN THE UAE**

Threatened by the pro-democracy demonstrations in the region in 2011, the UAE authorities further cracked down on dissent at that time. Mansoor's arrest, alongside four other activists, on the vague charges of insulting officials exemplified this crackdown.



The government-controlled media attempted to paint the activists calling for political reform as "religious extremists," a tactic used to prosecute individuals under the country's broad anti-terrorism law.

In 2012, the government issued a new cybercrime decree, which imposes severe restrictions on freedom of speech in social media, blogs, text messages, and emails. The law prohibits criticism of senior officials and demands for political reform. Once arrested, dissidents are often subjected to arbitrary detention, due process violations, and in some cases torture. Some are disappeared or held incommunicado for long periods of time. The power of the UAE's security apparatus is far-reaching and transcends government ministries. As a result, numerous individuals are serving long prison sentences for expressing their opinions online.

In addition, the state continues to exercise a firm grip over human rights defenders, pro-democracy activists, and civil society leaders even after they are

released from prison. Mansoor is banned from leaving the country which inhibits his ability to engage in his legitimate work. Such travels bans not only inhibit personal freedoms but also curb activists' ability to engage with stakeholders. In 2015 Mansoor won the prestigious Martin Ennals Award but was prevented from attending the ceremony in Geneva.

**THE U.S. APPROACH TO HUMAN RIGHTS AND COUNTERING VIOLENT EXTREMISM**

Through its public statements and diplomatic and military engagements, the United States has made it clear that it views the United Arab Emirates as an important partner in the fight against violent extremism, despite the fact that the country's repressive policies and practices fuel the very types of grievances which drive violent extremism.

In January the Obama Administration announced that it was "revamping" its communications efforts to counter violent extremism through a new Global Engagement Center (GEC). The GEC works closely with partners and allies abroad including the Sawab Center, a counterterrorism communications center in the UAE. This collaboration overlooks the country's record of brutally stifling freedom of expression. By amplifying the voices and credibility of repressive allies to ostensibly counter extremist narratives, the U.S. government appears to be disregarding one of the key components of its own CVE strategy.