



**Middle  
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17 August 2021

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Your Highness, Your Excellencies,

We write to you on behalf of the Committee on Academic Freedom of the Middle East Studies Association of North America (MESA) to express our deep alarm over fresh reports of the mistreatment of the internationally recognized human rights activist Ahmed Mansoor as well as your government's alleged use of Pegasus spyware not only against Mr. Mansoor but against many other targets as well. We have written to you repeatedly about Mr. Mansoor's unjust imprisonment as well as the conditions of his detention, and we are deeply troubled by the publication of a letter from Mr. Mansoor that details some of the conditions in which he continues to be held.

MESA was founded in 1966 to support scholarship and teaching on the Middle East and North Africa. The preeminent organization in the field, the Association publishes the *International Journal of Middle East Studies* and has nearly 2800 members worldwide. MESA is committed to ensuring academic freedom and freedom of expression, both within the region and in connection with the study of the region in North America and elsewhere.

Ahmed Mansoor is a member of the advisory board of the Gulf Center for Human Rights and the advisory committee of Human Rights Watch's Middle East and North Africa Division and was awarded the prestigious 2015 Martin Ennals Award for Human Rights Defenders. Mr. Mansoor was sentenced to ten years in prison in May 2018 after being convicted by the State Security Chamber of the Federal Appeals Court of insulting Emirati leaders by using social media "to publish false information and rumors" that "harm national unity and social harmony and damage the country's reputation." Mr. Mansoor had been one of the few advocates prepared to raise in public the human rights crackdown in the UAE after 2011. As such, he, and other advocates such as Dr. Nasser bin Ghaith, about whom we have



written repeatedly to you (see our letters [18 January 2019](#), [1 May 2019](#), [6 April 2018](#), and [29 March 2017](#) for Mr. Mansoor and [7 January 2019](#), [5 April 2017](#), [22 August 2016](#), and [21 August 2015](#) for Dr. bin Ghaith) have been targeted by your government in what appears to be a systematic campaign to silence independent thought and critical voices. Like Mr. Mansoor, Dr. bin Ghaith was sentenced to ten years' imprisonment (in March 2017) for public statements and tweets your government deemed "insulting."

Our most recent letter to you in 2019 drew your attention to media reports which suggested that Mr. Mansoor was on a hunger strike in protest at the unfair proceedings against him as well as the conditions of his detention, which included long periods in solitary confinement in an isolation cell at Al-Sadr Prison in Abu Dhabi that lacked a bed, water, and access to a shower. We therefore are gravely dismayed by the publication, on 16 July 2021, of a private letter in which Mr. Mansoor describes how he is being held in indefinite solitary confinement without access to basic necessities and meaningful contact to other prisoners and outside visitors. It appears to us that the conditions in which Mr. Mansoor is being held have not only not improved since our 2019 letter but continue to violate the United Nations Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners, also known as the Mandela Rules.

In view of the reporting on the Pegasus Project by a global consortium of journalists, we are also concerned at the credible evidence that spyware linked to the NSO Group was discovered on Mr. Mansoor's iPhone by the University of Toronto's Citizen Lab in 2016. We note also that media coverage of the Pegasus Project has indicated that your government added the telephone number of Matthew Hedges, the Durham University PhD student detained at Dubai Airport in May 2018 and convicted and sentenced to life imprisonment for 'spying' supposedly on behalf of the United Kingdom's Secret Intelligence Service in November 2018, to a list of targets for surveillance two months before he traveled from the United Kingdom to conduct his field research in the UAE. While your government responded to international pressure and pardoned Mr. Hedges, the Emirati authorities continue to hold Mr. Mansoor, Dr. bin Ghaith, and many others who have been detained and convicted simply for holding views that your government deems impermissible.

Your Highness, Your Excellencies, we have written to you many times in recent years to register our concern at the continual targeting and mistreatment of scholars and others whose only "crime" appears to have been to express an opinion of local and/or regional events that does not accord with the policies or point of view of your government. The pattern of such arrests and convictions led the MESA Board of Directors to issue a statement on *Deteriorating Security Conditions for Researchers in the UAE* at our annual meeting in November 2018. We observe with regret that the latest reports of Mr. Mansoor's treatment in detention and the possibly widescale (mis)use of Pegasus spyware suggest that your government continues to act in ways that are deeply inimical to the creation of a safe and secure environment for free speech and academic freedom in the UAE. As such, we call, once again, on your government to release Mr. Mansoor, Dr.



Re: Ahmed Mansoor and Nasser bin Ghaith  
17 August 2021  
Page 3

bin Ghaith, and all others imprisoned merely for holding opinions contrary to your own, and we urge the UAE to end the targeting of academics through spyware and all other forms of surveillance and intimidation.

We look forward to your response.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Dina Rizk Khoury', with a long, sweeping underline.

Dina Rizk Khoury  
MESA President  
Professor, George Washington University

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Laurie Brand', with a stylized, cursive style.

Laurie Brand  
Chair, Committee on Academic Freedom  
Professor Emerita, University of Southern California

cc:  
HE Yousef Al Otaiba, Ambassador of the United Arab Emirates to the United States  
Fax: 1 202 243 2432