Ahmed Mansoor
Human Rights Defender, UAE

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Abstract
An interview conducted by Manu Luksch with Ahmed Mansoor, human rights defender currently imprisoned by the government of the United Arab Emirates.

Introduction
In May 2016, artist, researcher and activist, Manu Luksch, travelled to the United Arab Emirates (UAE) to conduct research on ‘smart city’ initiatives in the region, and also to interview renowned human rights defender, Ahmed Mansoor. In March 2017, Mansoor was re-arrested, and on May 28th 2017, he was sentenced to 10 years’ imprisonment. Organisations like Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch and many others are campaigning for his release and #FreeAhmed has become a call online and on the streets in the form of graffiti and posters. Meanwhile the UAE has been one of four Gulf states, led by Saudi Arabia, who have extended their authoritarian campaign against dissidence beyond their borders to target other states who they regard as threatening the status quo, in particular the small but very wealthy state of Qatar, home of the Al Jazeera news network that has, like Mansoor, championed opposition movements in the Middle-East. In this context, Surveillance & Society decided it was important to publish this interview almost in full, with only minor edits, as it gives unique insight into the personal and professional experience of a human rights defender in an authoritarian state that is at the same time extremely wealthy, technologically advanced and highly integrated into global capitalism.

Manu Luksch (ML): Would you tell us a little bit about yourself? Where did you grow up?
Ahmed Mansoor (AM): My name is Ahmed Mansoor. I was born in a small village in the northern part of the United Arab Emirates, in an Emirate called Ras al-Khaimah […].

I grew up in that little village, finished primary school and high school in that Emirate, and then later on moved to a different city for college education. After that I went to the United States, [for] my Electrical Engineering degree and Master’s degree in Telecommunications. I came back to the UAE in the year 2000;
since then I’ve lived in Dubai and in 2008 became a citizen of Dubai. In the UAE we have different passports for different Emirates, and I had to change my passport from Ras al-Khaimah because I’d been living in Dubai for quite a long time, and my work used to be in Dubai.

[...]

Of course, throughout this history I was involved in many different things. The first was literature—I’d been writing in almost all the newspapers in the UAE about literature and specifically about poetry, and later I published a book on poetry. That’s where the value of freedom of expression became of great importance for me, and I started my involvement in human rights driven by the great respect that I have for freedom of expression.

[...]

ML: Let’s move forward in your personal history to the time slightly before and around 2011, if you could describe the atmosphere...

AM: 2011 was a turning point in the history of the UAE, really. What happened after 2011 is different to anything that happened before 2011. It’s a remarkable history. Of course, the reason is that there’s something that is called the Arab Spring, that started toward the end of 2010. [We’d] seen some of its initial results during early 2011.

[We] tried as well to create an atmosphere that would allow people to express themselves. We were really doing this as a group of citizens, not as a cosmopolitan city. We felt that there [was no] hope [that] others would promote our freedom—by others I’m referring to foreigners in the country, because their interests are different. They did not come here to look after my freedom and to look after my rights. So we had to do that ourselves, and the way things were moving was really toward narrowing freedom of expression and [introducing] more restrictions on the way. So we thought of coming up with something that would at least shock the society and take things to a different level. I myself along with a few individuals established an online discussion forum. At that time, the forums were flourishing, but the discussion was poor and it was not promoting human rights and tolerance. So we established this online discussion forum that we called UAE dialogue (UAEHewar.net). I thought that we can do something that is really different and promote freedom of expression to an extent that these guys cannot do, because of their own internal censorship, because of the restrictive environment that they work in, because of their orientation, because of many other reasons—so we came up with our site. And we opened the site for all types of discussions, political, religious, cultural, social... We had some parts that talk about music, and even the ruling system in UAE and adjacent countries. We even [translated] some of the articles that had been written about the UAE in the foreign media that would not be published here because [the authorities] do not want the people to know about these negative things that are being said about the country. We allowed people from different backgrounds to give their views and write their thoughts, we had some liberal people who were writing, we had some atheists, we had some religious people and they were all interacting and creating a dialogue that we’d never seen, and were craving in the country. Shortly after that the site became the focus of a lot of people and it was a daily site that lots of people [would] log in [to] and see what is written and what kind of discussion.

ML: Could you give concrete examples of what was discussed?

AM: One of the major subjects that was discussed in the forum was the ruling system in the UAE, and who really has the upper hand at the moment, and who is controlling the country, and [by] what mechanism the country is being handled, and what are the major contributing factors in shaping the policy of the country. Also we talked about the economic crisis that hit the UAE and the world; we talked about human rights,
religion was discussed greatly. In fact the first thread on the site [was] written by an atheist who was
challenging some of the Islamists. This thread was blocked by the authorities, three months after we
launched the site.

Of course after that the site became really [a] trendsetter, you could say, in discussions. And people were
spreading discussions through emails, through Blackberry Messenger, and were talking about it in the
society. That attracted security worries and close monitoring of the site and resulted [in] blocking [of] the
site six months after that. First of all they [did] some sort of technical blocking, so that when you opened
the site it would tell you, there’s a system issue, the site is not loading. I have an engineering background,
[so] I could understand that they’d blocked the site [at] the DNS [Domain Name Server] level, so the site
name wouldn’t translate to the IP address that pulls the site. So I asked people to write the IP address directly
and they were able to reach the site. But then a few months after that they blocked the whole site [again], so
it’s formally blocked, and we tried to challenge that through the courts, but then we reach 2011 and I was
arrested. But of course before the arrest we were very active, lots of intellectual people were very active,
we’d been thinking a lot about what is happening around us.

Since the foundation of this country people [have been] asking for real political representation through the
parliament—the Federal National Council (FNC) which is supposed to represent the people. Unfortunately
that body is a purely consultative body that does not have any legislative or regulatory authority, so in 2006
the president of UAE thought of improving that situation and put [forward a] plan to elect some of its
members—hand-picked people would elect half of the members without really adding any authority to the
parliament. [We] gave it the benefit of the doubt, we went through all this process, and I was also one of
those candidates who wanted to show some sort of willingness to accept this kind of gradual improvement.
[In] 2011 there was supposed to be another election, also by some hand-picked people, to elect some
members of the FNC without adding any authority to the work they can do. [That’s when] myself and other
intellectuals in the UAE came up with the 3rd of March Petition (we wrote it on that date), [that] was directed
to the president and the other six rulers of the UAE, urging them to make constitutional change to allow the
members of the FNC to be elected by means of universal suffrage, like everywhere else in the world, and to
give this parliament-full legislative and regulatory power.

That petition was well received in the beginning by the authorities, [but] when we started to defend and
promote it in TV interviews and with international news agencies, we [saw] a strange change that happened
suddenly, during the [peak of the] Arab Spring. [By] that time, two presidents, in Tunisia and Egypt, [had
been] thrown out basically, so that brought everybody here to [an] extreme alert. [We] weren’t driven
initially by what was happening in the Arab Spring as much as a response to [the] decree issued [in] Feb
2011 that governs new elections and the number of people who are going to be hand-picked again to elect
members of the FNC. [We] were surprised to see no improvement [in] parliament, basically there is no new
power, and we were expecting that, during the Arab Spring, they would at least try to absorb [the] anger
that was growing in the whole Arab world for more freedom and more accountability. [We] were shocked
to see no improvement. That’s why we [wrote] this petition, and we wrote it in a very polite manner. But
the reaction from the security authorities was extreme, and then they started focusing on me because I was
really one of the initiators of it.

There were other reasons as well—I was involved for many years in defending human rights [and] had some
very good links with international human rights organisations, the international media and also the United
Nations. [The] smear campaign that the authorities launched was really focusing on me, and I could see that
they were trying to prepare the nation for my arrest, because [they knew] that my arrest would be noticed
by the international community. So they spared absolutely no effort really to smear me; they started to
fabricate videos; they created a dedicated internet site [with] no news except [about me]; they made up
stories every day about me, and started to spread that information by Blackberry Messenger, by Facebook,
by Twitter at a later stage—and then radio got involved, TV got involved, newspaper writers started getting
involved. I received several death threats by individuals [who] even indicated their actual names and phone numbers; in some cases they put their photos on their Facebook profiles. I knew that something [was] going to happen so I took copies of these threats to my lawyer in the hope that we would take legal action. Unfortunately [the threats] were orchestrated by the body that was supposed to be protecting us, and none of these cases were accepted by the authorities.

When I was arrested on April 8th 2011, they did not attribute my arrest to the petition, but to my humiliating the president, Crown Prince and prime minister of the UAE because I was the owner of the online discussion forum. Though we did not declare our names, by monitoring the site [the authorities] managed to know who was—or who could be, anyhow—running the site; they could easily pinpoint certain people who are concerned about freedom of expression and human rights. [Beyond] that I had asked people to boycott the election that was going to be held in 2011 for the parliament because I seriously believed it was unconstitutional, so I called it a quasi-election—and that was also brought as a charge against me. They did not accuse me of writing any humiliating comment, as opposed to my other four colleagues, [who] never met in person before we were arrested. We became widely known as the UAE Five; one of [us], professor of law at Sorbonne University, Dr. Nasser bin Ghaith, is right now again going back [to] nine months in solitary confinement because of some tweets that he wrote with regard to Egypt, and some other political opinions.

[This] is where weird things really started, and what happened afterward was only an escalation to what we experienced in 2011. We started for the first time to see people’s citizenships being revoked. We started to see lots of arbitrary detention of people of different backgrounds, focusing mainly on the Islamists. We’ve seen enforced disappearance, torture, trumped up charges and politically motivated trials. If you go and look at the UAE human rights record right now from all the prominent human rights organisations, including the United Nations, these are the major concerns and the major themes. The questions that everybody was asking—why [has] UAE taken [these] steps? Do we really need that in the UAE? Do we have a threat in UAE? And the answers—no. Even the biggest group of people that was targeted by the UAE authorities, the Islamists, those whom they think have some links to the Muslim Brotherhood’s intellectual beliefs—which they do not deny by the way—were established since 1974, a few years after the foundation of the country, and they were supported by the government throughout those years. In fact, the late Sheikh Rashid, who was one of the main founders of this country along with Sheikh Zayed, granted-permission for the al-Islah¹ group—they call it the Reform and Social Guidance Association—which is an Islamist group, a moderate group that was never a threat to the country. In fact it was working closely with the government and the rulers even sometimes [attended] their events. During the Arab Spring and the rise of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt (and to some extent as well in Tunisia), the government thought that these guys might be empowered by [those] actions there, and decided to really crack down on them. They are totally different [to] those guys in Egypt, although they have similar intellectual beliefs […]. But they were really working within the system and they were considered even to be the cream of the society, they were role models a few days before [their] arrest them in 2012. And then suddenly the authorities wanted us to believe that this group of people wanted to overthrow the government and take over. The smear campaign that was practiced against me in 2011 was a rehearsal; the authorities implemented the same thing against [al-Islah], but they were taken to secret detention; many of them came in front of the court and claimed to be tortured. That torture was not investigated and a lot of them are spending 10 years imprisonment in the UAE right now.

This is where we started to see a real deviation from the core values of the UAE. The founders of the UAE stated in the preface of the constitution that they would lead the country to full parliamentary representation. What we asked for was really to implement that statement in the constitution, and yet that was dealt with harshly, because the total orientation of the country is now towards security, and the internal and external

¹ See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Al_Islah_(United_Arab_Emirates). Perhaps not as straightforwardly uncontroversial as Mansoor makes out.
policy of the UAE is really centred around an obsession with the Muslim Brotherhood, never a threat to the UAE. Yes, we are in a very turbulent region that has lots of problems, but I don’t think by resorting to this security mechanism you will able to defeat [the problems], because you are not fortifying your internal frontier, you are creating more reasons for internal differences while you are supposed to have stronger unity inside. But if you are seen in the region to be the country that is leading the anti-democracy movement—UAE is now seen like that, Saudi Arabia is now seen like that… All the Arab Spring countries that were hoping for a better future were dealt with by Saudi Arabia and UAE and the dictatorships were brought back and supported—Egypt is the biggest example of this. Egypt’s biggest supporter is UAE in the first place, and Saudi Arabia in the second. So the UAE is seen right now in the region as a force that is going against the hope of the nations, of the people in the regions—despite the fact that it is creating big cities and great images for the young Arab people and an environment that they would love to live in. But there is a deep contradiction here—the UAE government needs people to live by its rules, it doesn’t want to give them freedom. Freedom is the core value of existence. If you do not have freedom you don’t have anything else. You could lose everything else. There is nothing you could do as sustainable development without human rights, and this is what we lack in the region and of course, UAE is part of that as well.

**ML: From the outside, the paradox that we perceive is that the UAE has this exceptional material freedom which, unlike other countries with weak or no democratic representation, is also shared out, invested in the people—like higher education, health support.**

**AM:** You know we live in this real paradox, and it has a deep contradiction if you look at it from a distance and if you are not attached to this or that part of the equation. Yes, UAE offered free schools for its citizens, sent lots of people aboard for education, higher degrees and so on, and in every speech they emphasise the fact that the youth and the citizens are the building blocks of this country, and they are proud of them, and they believe that with these kinds of generations and these kinds of people, that the country is going to thrive and improve and develop further. [They] are putting all [those] kinds of flattering statements in the speeches of the political figures of the country. [But] when you say that if we are that good and if we are that well educated and if we are going to be a major bloc for future development, why don’t you involve us in the political decision making process, why don’t you get us involved in making the decisions that really matter to us, to future generations? Why don’t you get us involved in knowing how the wealth of this country is distributed, why don’t we [have] a monitoring tool for that? Basically what we ask for is really what everybody was asking for, to have representation that really holds the government accountable for whatever they do. Yet you will hear a response saying that we are not ready for that. So how come we are ready to lead the world, for example—you’ve been making poetry and flattering all the citizens, the young generations, the youth [about] the level of work that they could do and the level of creativity that they could [have], and that they are the arms of these developments—and suddenly they are not ready to choose their representatives in the government and to choose responsibly.

So [the authorities] make excuses like, we’ve seen some other countries in this region that allowed this kind of representation with the result that development was regressing in these countries. And they are referring to Kuwait of course which has a parliament that is elected by the people and has regulatory and legislative authority, but the country is not doing well compared to our country. So you suddenly become, from a marvellous citizen, an incapable citizen, unable to select the people that would represent you correctly, and hindering development. We live that kind of contradiction. From the outside you see beautiful buildings, great shopping malls, beautiful beaches, glittering windows on the highest skyscraper on Earth, but when [it comes] to values [without which] no nation would be able to sustain its development, they are of no existence. In fact, it is not that they are of no existence, but they are considered to be a threat to the security of the country. How would a critical view on the political system be a threat to the existence of this country or to its economy or to its foreign interests, for example? How would people associating with themselves and asking for a change in the society that they think is not proper going to endanger the political system.
and collapse [the] whole country? There is no real threat from any of these individuals that were arrested by the UAE. And yet we are asked—or not asked, even; the government is imposing certain types of views that [it] would like people to adopt, and raise no question about, and that’s what we cannot understand. This is the contradiction. So from one side you see something beautiful, materialistic, basically freedom as you expressed, but actual freedom is not there. You wouldn’t be able to express yourself really [on] so many subjects, and now they’ve put an arsenal of laws and regulations as well to reduce the space that is available for people speak up. You could be faced with a long list of punishments that would deter anybody from taking that step forward. You could lose your job, you [could] be put on travel ban, you [would] not get scholarships, even your kids would not get scholarships, your citizenship [could] be revoked—and that is a real death, that’s equivalent to a death penalty. Physically you’ll exist within the space that you occupy, that’s about all of it, but you have no other means to even identify yourself to anybody else, because you don’t have any documents that prove that you are there—and they are doing this even to children, some that are not even in primary school yet—their citizenship was revoked because their fathers were considered to be political prisoners. So it [becomes] a punishment as well, besides the fact that many are spending the best [years] of their lives behind bars, for no good reason really, and [going] through serious ill treatment, torture, psychologically [and] physically. [T]his is the basic unit of the society that you are destroying—lots of the people that you took to jail and through that process have families. Who is going to pay for their living expenses? Where could that kind of [father-child] passion take place if the kids are even unable to touch their father because there are barriers when you go see them in jail.

I believe that if you want to measure how humanistic any situation is, you need to start from the jail, because [that] is where you see how much any government really cares about human rights. And I’ve been there in those types of jails; others are in an even worse situation than mine, and went through [even] worse jails than the one I’ve been to, and I can tell you how awful those jails are. Even your rights that they put in their regulations are not implemented. It’s just on document and it’s show, so that they can use it in the propaganda that serves their purpose. But there’s no actual respect [for] even the regulations that they put in. So that kind of contradiction really exists massively, massively in this country.

And it’s not only that… I’ll throw a new dimension to this discussion… even in technology, we are trying to import the latest technology in the region, and now were talking about cars without even a driver, and we’re talking about space authorities to explore outer space and so on, while at the same time we cannot use some VoIP services like WhatsApp voice, we cannot use FaceTime, we cannot use Snapchat Voice and video services, voice call services, and Facebook voice services simply because the authorities here are very obsessed about security. If they cannot monitor any tool, they will not allow it. And this is going really to go with us all the way until a good balance is struck between what is absolutely necessary for the security of people and what is really necessary for the people to do the things that they have to do and to enjoy their lives as well. At the moment that balance is not there at all. The only thing that you can enjoy is the area around you, the physical entities of this country. But the incorporeal values, the freedoms, human rights, political participation, justice—are the values that we are missing. And these are the values that we are trying our best, as human rights defenders, to promote and educate people about and raise awareness about.

ML: I follow a little bit what the Smart Dubai initiative publishes and announces, and it is the aim of the government that the whole range of citizen services will be delivered to your smartphone, the whole range from navigating the streets in driverless cars to e-elections or cashless payment. It’s called m-governance (governance through mobile phone). And of course in some fields more transparency is to be welcomed, but it also means that the individual becomes transparent, because every use you make of and every step you take with the smartphone in your pocket is fully documented, as GPS traces, or as communications, or transactions. Through going smart, Dubai wants to make
sure it’s the ‘happiest city’ by 2020, and this is really being pushed and promoted and invested into and spoken about abroad at Smart City expos...

AM: Actually I think Dubai as a city by itself has great potential, and the ruler of Dubai has a vision—that is something that I have to say, the guy started e-government in the very early stages of the internet. He has this view and he implemented it, and other cities and countries started to copy Dubai’s experience. So they are really ahead of everybody else in the region when it comes to implementing new technologies, bringing in new ideas and new concepts to the region. The issue here probably is that this whole process is centralised, and the level of contribution by individuals is really only at the level of execution, as opposed to building the whole, or setting out a future path. So somebody else is going to do the thinking for you and you’ll be only executing it. And this is not real participation to me. But to give credit to the ruler of Dubai, he is a great visionary guy who has lots of good ideas that would benefit the region and the people. However, on the other side, the economic/business model that has been put onto Dubai has been based on real estate, which is why in 2008, 2009, during the financial crisis it was greatly affected.

ML: On the one hand increased network society or e-services, or as it is labelled in the current discourse, ‘smart’, ‘smart city initiatives’—this summarises a whole range of services, it is not really well defined—on the one hand, it promises efficiency but on the other hand it’s not really clear how everything from your health indices to where you go to who you communicate with, is protected, if smart services are controlled by the government.

AM: Well I think this ‘Smart City’ concept and the consequences that go with the move toward well connected and smart cities is universal, and they usually do not pertain to any specific geographical location or city. [In] countries where the justice system is strong and is independent, you will be able to claim your rights, they would be preserved through the judiciary system as well as the laws that would give you protection. However when you come to third world countries where the judicial system is not independent and is totally under the control of the executive authorities, the laws do not even provide you with protection as an individual. You wouldn’t be able, for example, to get the information about yourself held by any of the authorities. There is no Information Act; we don’t even have a right to information about any government spending. So the impact of a smart city kind of arrangement in a democratic country is different than its impact in a non-democratic country. We would suffer a lot more. Like anywhere else in the world, an individual in the UAE cares about privacy, but, especially if you are involved in political activities or human rights activities, you will have to be extremely cautious about what you carry with you. Your smartphone is not a smartphone anymore, it’s a tracking device, basically. Even your regular telephones are tracking devices by nature because they communicate with the towers, and the authorities know to great proximity where you are by using the technology itself. They basically measure the signal-to-noise ratio from the tower and they can tell your location within metres. This is even before smartphones.

With smartphones, there are several hundred applications that can track you. In fact, one amazing thing showed the trend [in the] UAE—in 2009, the telecom operator pushed spyware over the air to all Blackberry devices. And it was a real big scandal, because it was discovered immediately by software experts as well as acknowledged by the Blackberry company. The UAE authorities wanted to have full control, they want to have everything under their view. At that time the encryption algorithm of Blackberry Messenger hadn’t been given to the authorities, so Blackberry was the most secure communications tool back then. The authorities decided to stop Blackberry services because they (RIM/Blackberry) didn’t want to give them the encryption keys after [the authorities] failed to push the spyware over the air. (People didn’t run it, and didn’t execute it, and [the authorities] stopped afterward). So then apparently, Blackberry gave [the UAE authorities] the encryption keys so that they could decode some of the activities, and we have evidence that that did happen actually in the UAE.
In the region here we have to be extremely cautious. The technology that is developed in the West that is supposed to be adding extra protection to individuals sometimes becomes, to the contrary, a risk factor here. For example, in emails they have technology called two-step verification, where they send you, for example, a code on your phone you have to use to enter your email. In our country this is a risk factor because your phones are monitored as an activist, and if the government intercepts the code they could use it to log in to your emails. There is no respect really for the laws and regulations, and the ethics also that technology brings in. You are monitored 24/7, basically—even when you sleep at home you put the phone somewhere beside you, they know you’re at home, you’re not active on Twitter, you’re not active on Facebook, you’re not communicating with anybody else, so probably you’re sleeping. So this is part of what technology brings to us as well.

[...]

ML: Let’s return to your personal story. What happened after the UAEHewar site had been taken down and you had been arrested?

AM: After we signed the 3rd of March petition, and after the smear campaign against myself and other individuals that participated in the petition, I was arrested on the 8th of April, 2011. In general, here—and this is not specific to me—when you are taken into jail, you are exposed to a very humiliating body search, where you have to get rid of all of your clothes and make some movements, up and down on both the front and the back sides of your body while you are naked. I did this in Dubai and unfortunately also for the second time in Abu Dhabi. I spent overall 11 days in solitary confinement, two days here and nine days in Abu Dhabi, but I was in the public jail.

During that time the smear campaign was going on against us and we were mistreated in the jail as a group. We were isolated in many aspects from the rest of the inmates in the jail, initially during the solitary confinement, and then afterward as well. We weren’t given the same rights as everybody else in the jail. When I was admitted in the jail, one of the careless police officers did not give me clean clothes; he saw a wheelchair with some clothes on it and told me, ‘you can wear these things’. I was really shocked—at least he should have given me some clean clothes—but because I did not have any experience, I did not know how things happen in the jail. A few days after that I felt my waist itching, and I started to get some spots on the waist and on the lower part of my body. The spots became larger and black, so I started to complain. And then the cell that I was in was very, very dirty and it wasn’t air conditioned. During April it was OK, but afterward in the summertime—imagine how bad a cell that is not air-conditioned in the middle of the desert could be. During my stay there, one guy passed away inside one of those cells probably because of the heat, mainly.

[After] that, we were taken to the general blocks while we were prepared for trial. The hearings did not start at once. We were taken back and forth for interrogation about the online discussion forum and what had been written there, and political views. During that time they told people not to talk to us about our case because there was a huge campaign running against us throughout the period that we were in jail—almost 8 months—in all the government media. Not only that but they also invoked the tribes and different Emirates to go and sign a petition against us and to take me to court because I ‘hurt their feelings’ by criticising the government and the president and so on... well, I didn’t do anything of that. I can criticise anybody politically, I have the right to do so, and I still do that, but I do not make derogatory comments, and we didn’t even allow libellous comments or defamation of people—we need people to focus on ideas as opposed to individuals and personal things. But anyhow during our time in jail we were not allowed to go to the library, to the recreation centre, we weren’t given the same level of communication capabilities with the outside world like everybody else, and we were isolated in the visiting area.
The worst thing that happened to me was that I couldn’t get medical treatment. After that skin disease I also got scabies, where my whole body became itchy and I wasn’t able to sleep, day or night. I’d write letter after letter [asking] to see a dermatologist, but they would not allow me to see him. In the beginning they told me he’s on leave, and then after he came off leave, they told me ‘you’ll be seeing him’. I kept running after all the officers there to allow me to see a dermatologist, because I really couldn’t sleep, my whole body was itching day and night. I was in a miserable situation for more than three months, until I managed to see a doctor—the general practitioner, but not the dermatologist. He was able to figure out easily that I had scabies and he had to send me right away for medical isolation. The treatment was easy, you just had to do it—but that was the most difficult thing that happened to me health-wise.

Also throughout this period, they were moving us between the cells arbitrarily so that we did not have a stable place inside the jail. I’d spend 10 days here and then suddenly they’d come to me in the middle of the night or early in the morning and say, ‘you’re going to be relocated to a different cell’. And they weren’t putting us together—the five of us had to be in different blocks, so that we didn’t have that psychological stability.

And then, the trials were going on, and every time we got to the trial, we’d see people protesting outside, government-sponsored individuals protesting outside. The police served them juice and water, and wouldn’t allow people to support us outside. Initially the hearings were on camera, behind closed doors—basically nobody was allowed to enter the hearing—and they changed the judge three times during this whole trial! We weren’t really comfortable and could see things were not right, our lawyers weren’t given the right time to talk, we weren’t given the right time to talk, the hearings were closed for I don’t know what reasons… At that time we were still receiving death threats from outside and people were making [up] stories about us every day inside the jail. So we told the judge, ‘either you open the door and let the hearing be public, or we’re going to leave, we’ll boycott the hearings’. He totally ignored what we told him and our request, so we decided to open the door and move away from the courtroom, but not the court—there is another block outside. So we left, we just opened the door and walked out there, and then we boycotted all the subsequent hearings until the end. So over the course of maybe three months, we wouldn’t go to court. Every time they came to us to take us to the court, we refused, and then in the last 16 days we went on hunger strike, all five of us.

And then afterwards—the hearings after the one that we walked out from was opened to the public, and many human rights organisations were able to come into the country and attend the hearings. They saw something that usually doesn’t happen in courts—basically, some lawyers who were appointed by citizens who wanted to sue us conducted an economic presentation inside the court, and showed how prosperous the people were and what good things the government did for them. The human rights organisations were amazed to see this kind of thing happening inside the court, and understood the reasons that we boycotted the hearings. Anyhow, that continued until the very last date. On the verdict date, the phones were switched off deliberately so that we could not call our families and understand what was happening. But we had some radios there and came to know from the BBC that I was sentenced to three years, and that everybody else was sentenced to two years. However, the next day the sentences were commuted and we were released on presidential pardon.

Now things did not stop there for me. When I was walking out of the jail, a journalist waiting outside asked if we were going to stop doing what we’d been doing now that we’d received a pardon. I told her, ‘To the contrary, I really do not have the courage to back off. I have more reasons, now that I went myself through this experience, to continue my work in human rights. Not only have I been listening to others’ stories, now I have my own story as well’. So I continued my activities. I was immediately fired from my job. The authorities did not return my passport (till this day, by the way). They denied me a Certificate of Good Conduct which means that I cannot even work, because it’s a prerequisite for applying for any job in the UAE.
Then, the authorities started arresting the *al-Islah* group, an Islamist group. As a human rights defender, I do not look at the intellectual background of people, I consider them as abstract human beings. I abstract them from everything else. To me they are human beings, whether they are criminals, whether they are Islamists, whether they are leftists, atheists… I do not really care about their intellectual beliefs as much as I care about their rights as human beings, and whether these were violated according to the international definition. So I started defending these individuals, just as I’ve been defending everybody else as a human rights defender.

I was still under the same [smear] campaign month after month until in Sept 2012, I was assaulted physically at the University. I’d started an additional degree in the evenings, a law degree. I wanted to foster my human rights interest academically. I had to stop when they put me in jail, and then after I was released I went back to the University. I’d done a semester over the spring semester; the campaign was still running against me, inflating people’s emotions against me. The authorities were really doing a great job—it was a clear case of McCarthyism, they were defaming us so that people would think that we were enemies of the country. They spared absolutely no effort—there were TV shows, newspaper, radio… they were working relentlessly to smear us. One day, during the add and drop weeks [when] not all the people were at the University, a person approached me behind my car and asked if I was Ahmed Mansoor. I said yes and extended my hand to shake; he spat in my face and pushed me [to the ground]. I was carrying my bag and so got scratched on my arm and leg. When I gained my balance and tried to run after him he ran away. Somebody was waiting for him inside a car that was parked with easy access to the external gate and he jumped inside the car, without saying anything else.

A week later, I was attacked again at the University, this time by a huge guy […] . He grabbed me from the back of my neck and started giving me a series of punches, strong punches to the head, without saying anything. I started to scream and people started gathering—this was in the parking lot inside the University. And when people gathered, he ran away. It was quick but they were severe punches to the head, and he was focusing on the head without saying anything. When I was able to again stand and see where they were heading, another short, muscly guy jumped in front of me from behind the trees to obstruct me from moving. Then he also ran to the same car that was parked there with somebody inside it, and they got away. In both cases I had to go and get medical reports and open cases with the police, but of course nothing happened.

Campaigns continued against me, and my activities continued. Now I’m talking about the major incident that happened to me: in January 2013, money suddenly disappeared from my bank account. I’d been working for 12 years in a company, and when they fired me [after I was released from jail] they gave me my end of service benefit. That was the only money that I had to live for a few years, and it disappeared from my bank account. I was really shocked, to tell you the truth—I’m talking about almost USD 140,000 that suddenly disappeared. I called the bank and they said that a cheque had been withdrawn from my account. I told them that I did not write a cheque to anybody, and that this was fraud. My bank is in Abu Dhabi; the transaction took place in Abu Dhabi and I was living in Dubai at that time. The next day I went to the bank—they were shocked themselves, and brought my chequebook. I told them that the page was not in my chequebook—it was not there at all and it had not been there, it seemed to me… there were 11 pages before it and four pages after that were not used, and that page did not exist at all. I told them that maybe somebody took it during the printing of the chequebook. I went to the police and file a case, and to the prosecution [Public Prosecution Office in Abu Dhabi]. When I was going there, a taxi driver honked at me telling me there was a problem with my tyres, so I pulled over and saw that the valves of the tyres had been loosened deliberately—both tyres on the [passenger] side. I knew that I was being watched. So I fixed them and had my brother-in-law, who was with me, wait inside the car [while] I went to the prosecution. Then I went to the police, and drove back to Dubai.

Afterwards, I was called twice by the criminal lab in Abu Dhabi to go and give samples of my handwriting and bring them documents that had my signature. They also brought my files from the bank to see if the
signature was mine or not. They came to the conclusion that the signature on the cheque had been forged, the handwriting on the cheque was not mine, and the cheque had been removed from the chequebook after it was stapled together in a very professional manner. According to UAE law, I’d get my money back, but unfortunately, to this day, I didn’t, and the court did not help me.

What happened [later] in the same month raised my doubts. I had given it the benefit of [the] doubt, that maybe there was some criminal group. I had to give it the benefit of the doubt. Three weeks after that, on January 23rd I had to go to the Prosecution in Abu Dhabi again to give my feedback. I parked my car in the parking lot of the Prosecution, which is designated for customers, and spent two hours inside. After I finished my session, I went out and my car wasn’t there. They’d stolen my car. Vanished! So I had to file another case of a stolen car. And that car was worth around USD 60,000, so I’m talking about USD 200,000 taken from me in one month. And till today, they’ve refused to give me the police report so that I can claim my car from the insurers. I went through the court; the individual who stole my money is Iranian, supposedly, and they’ve seen his face on CCTV and they have his picture, but they can’t locate him because he gave them a wrong ID, a fake passport. Basically they say that this name does not exist, and the ID he provided was fake, so the criminal court decided that he’d be given one year imprisonment, and deported afterwards. On the civil side, the bank is responsible, according to UAE law, and is supposed to give me my money back. However the court decided that the bank is not responsible, and that I have to go and get my money from this ghost who does not exist. So I did not get my money or my car, and to this day I cannot even get a job because I’ve been denied a Certificate of Good Conduct.

So this is one side of the spectrum; on the other side I’ve been targeted several times by spyware. They’ve hacked my emails more than once, they hacked my twitter account. I was able to get my emails back—except Hotmail, because Microsoft aren’t cooperating with me. [The hackers] managed to download all of my emails, which put at great risk not only me, but also the victims that were talking to me about their problems and the abuse that they were receiving, and were asking for help. So that’s the kind of pressure exerted on a person like myself who’s really a very peaceful person, who’s doing nothing really to threaten the security of the country. Yet if I am taken to jail I will be treated as a person who is threatening the security of the country, threatening the unity of the society, and I’ll be dealt with in the special court and given a sentence that I cannot appeal. All of my work is related to human rights. This is the type of harassment that we receive as human rights activists and defenders in the UAE. We are not involved in any type of aggressive activities at all, we are very peaceful people. But the government, like all the governments in the region, apparently, sees us as a threat to their existence. So I just gave you a panoramic view of the kind of harassment I received from 2011 till now.

**ML: How do you go about your work today? Is this something you can speak about?**

**AM:** Oh yes […] my activities involve monitoring and documentation and advocacy of human rights. Because of my international reach, I also help people who are voiceless in this country to voice their agony, to voice the abuses and violations that they face, to the international community. I help those victims by giving them the consultancy they need in these kinds of situations. I raise awareness about these kinds of violations using the international media that I can reach, and also social media on which I am very active. Of course, there are lots of interactions that happen with the stakeholders, the victims of different human rights violations, and that is the main thing that I’m trying to preserve [despite] all the government harassment and ability to infringe upon the communications tools that we use, the sophisticated software that they use to monitor our activities, chats, even movements. I’ve been physically followed, more than once, and of course that hinders your activities, because sometimes the victims would like to be anonymous. They don’t want to be seen because that might cause some retaliation against them. [That’s what] my work involves, because I do not have the ability to move freely even inside the country, let alone outside the country, because since 2011 I do not have a passport. Beyond that, I’m on a travel ban as well, so I cannot even use my ID to travel in the neighbouring GCC [Gulf Cooperation Council]. We can usually use our ID
cards to move between countries in the region, but I’m on a blacklist, so even if I had my passport, I wouldn’t be able to travel. So these are the types of difficulties that we are working with, in a country that portrays itself as a progressive state, but [in which] and we are unable really to express our views and opinions or [exercise] our legitimate human rights.

[…]

**ML:** The kind of human rights breaches in the UAE that are well known abroad concern the construction site workers—migrants, not Emiratis.

**AM:** Right, labourers. In UAE, between 2003 and 2006, the subject that was raised the most by human rights organisations was labour rights. Thanks to those organisations, they’ve helped a lot in improving slightly the situation of the labourers and immigrant workers. The government took some good steps forward in this area; however it is far less than what should be in reality. We hoped that the sponsorship system would be totally abolished, and we hoped to see labourers able to bargain collectively and set out their own syndicates and bars. But this is not only not available to the migrant labourers, it is also not available to the citizens, so we share with them the same issues. The government set some criteria for the living conditions of the labourers, minimum requirements and standards, but they are not implemented in reality in many places. Though the government is trying to a certain extent to improve in this area, due to the large number of blue collar workers in the UAE and the limited number of inspectors who can efficiently cover and inspect all areas and inspect them, we see some people still living in miserable conditions that do not meet the minimum requirements of decent and acceptable human conditions. So we still have all these issues, yet we have to acknowledge that the government has started to take some positive steps forward. One of the biggest problems initially was that employers did not even pay salaries to the labourers. To overcome that, the government created a wage protection system. It is an automatic system that every salary has to go through, and if you don’t pay your salaries, it raises an alarm with the Ministry of Labour and they block any transactions by your company. That helped a lot, it was a good improvement. After that, they passed a regulation that stopped people from working in the summer time from 1pm till 3pm or 4pm, and that was also straightforward. Recently they introduced a new regulation that allows labourers to terminate their contracts without facing a ban, such as a one year ban, if they spend a minimum of 6 months on their existing contracts. So there are some improvements, but still quite a lot more needs to be done.

What characterises the biggest human rights issue in the UAE is the lack of freedom of expression—not simply a lowered ceiling, but that it does not exist, it is completely destroyed by the laws that the UAE introduced and by the practice on the ground. They enforce arbitrary detention (according to international terminology); they enforce disappearance and [making] people incommunicado, [they use] torture and ill-treatment and degrading treatment of individuals, [there are] political trials—these are the main human rights violations in the UAE according to the international community. We never expected the UAE to have that image, and there’s really no reason for it to be in that spot really, but if you go and search about human rights in the UAE, this is what you will get. And when you talk about torture and when you talk about enforced disappearance you’re talking—according to international law—about crimes against humanity. If it’s practised systematically, it could [amount] to crimes against humanity—besides the fact that it is subhuman behaviour. This is where we are, unfortunately, today.

[…]

I think the UAE could really be a great country, it could be an example, it could be the candle in a rather dark region. But why are we not respecting Emiratis? Why are human rights and freedom of expression and opinion not preserved, not respected—they do not really constitute any danger to this country. You cannot have just one part of the equation. If you want to be a modern, progressive city, then human rights is a core
value—otherwise you’re just setting a different standard of progressiveness according to your understanding of it, which is basically a lean understanding.

**ML:** It’s interesting that also for you it’s a mystery in the sense that it’s unnecessary even to keep the existing power structures in place.

**AM:** I have my political view, I’ve voiced my political view on TV and in my writings... If it was up to me, I think the best political structure for the UAE would be to move from this federation concept—because it’s a hindrance, an obstacle right now to so many things—and to move to a constitutional monarchy, like the UK for example, where the ruling family owns but does not really run the country. That’s probably the trend that everybody’s going to [follow] after they go through the struggle. And unfortunately, we in the region apparently will have to go through the full duty cycle of the struggle to reach that state, to gain our freedom, because we relaxed for quite a long time while we were supposed to insist on those values being implemented, those freedoms being respected, from day one. We should have made sure that legal and social guarantees are in place to foster these kinds of principles. So now we have to do quite a lot of work, and a lot of it retroactively, unfortunately.

The UAE is living in the worst time of its history, in [terms of] human rights. It’s the darkest era for the UAE—we’ve never been in this kind of situation, or anywhere close to this situation, throughout the history of the UAE, and even before that. So we’re moving fast on one track, moving forward, and we’re moving backward, moving fast in the other direction as well.

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*Mansoor and Luksch: ‘The last human rights defender in the United Arab Emirates’*