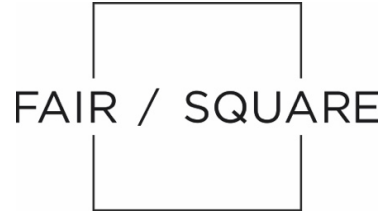




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November 9, 2021

Stephen J. Toope

Vice-Chancellor

University of Cambridge

Via email: stephen.toope@admin.cam.ac.uk; governance@admin.cam.ac.uk; vice-chancellor@admin.cam.ac.uk

Re: Potential Strategic Partnership Between the University of Cambridge and the United Arab Emirates

Dear Vice-Chancellor Toope,

We are writing in relation to the proposed strategic partnership between the University of Cambridge and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) government. We understand that the University has decided for the time being not to pursue the partnership, largely in response to the UAE's well-publicized use of Pegasus spyware, but note that you declined to rule out a deal with the UAE in the future, commenting that such a deal would be contingent on a "robust discussion".

We are writing to encourage you to consider very seriously the implications of such a partnership both for the University and for the human rights climate in the UAE, which continues to be a cause for grave concern. We believe that such a partnership would serve to whitewash the reputation of a government that systematically imprisons critics and denies fundamental civil and political rights.

In its initial statement on the potential collaboration, the University of Cambridge describes the UAE as "a regional and international hub for collaboration in research, art, education and business, in areas as diverse as Mars exploration and celebrating emerging Arab artists." Human rights groups and United Nations human rights experts describe a far more repressive climate. They have documented how civil society activism and free expression have been quashed by a combination of deeply repressive laws, the absence of an independent judiciary and the growth of an extensive and highly sophisticated electronic surveillance network that the UAE has used to target its own citizens and foreign critics of its rulers. The UAE's use of sophisticated spyware against dissidents and critics of its government had been well documented long before the allegations that appeared in *The Guardian* newspaper in July 2020.

It should be of serious concern to University faculty, students, and alumni that there are no Emirati human rights organizations or activists who can speak publicly about this issue. The UAE's most celebrated human rights activist, Ahmed Mansoor, is in the notorious al-Sadr prison near Abu Dhabi serving a 10-year prison sentence handed down on May 29, 2018, by the State Security Chamber of the Abu Dhabi Court of Appeals following a grossly unfair trial on spurious charges. UAE authorities have held him largely incommunicado, isolated him from other prisoners, and denied him a bed and mattress since his arbitrary detention in March 2017. Mansoor was one of the very few activists in the UAE who publicly criticized the UAE's rulers and sought to shine a spotlight on human rights abuses in the country.

Academics and journalists are acutely vulnerable to persecution. In August 2015, UAE authorities arrested academic Nasser bin Ghaith, a professor at Sorbonne Abu Dhabi University, on spurious charges that violate his right to freedom of expression and association. A UAE court sentenced him to 10 years in prison in March 2017 following a grossly unfair trial. In May 2018, security forces arrested British academic Matthew Hedges at Dubai International Airport as he was preparing to leave the country following a two-week research trip to the UAE. Authorities held Hedges, a then-PhD candidate at Durham University, in pretrial detention for more than five months. In November 2018, a UAE court sentenced Hedges to life in prison for allegedly "spying" for the UK government. Five days later, following growing diplomatic pressure and international outrage, the UAE pardoned him.

Since 2011, UAE authorities have frequently barred entry to academics, writers, artists, and journalists, many of whom had been critical of the UAE's mistreatment of migrant workers. Numerous faculty at New York University (NYU), which has a campus in Abu Dhabi, have endured arbitrary denials of entry to the country. In March 2015, the UAE denied entry to NYU professor and labor expert Andrew Ross, a staunch critic of migrant worker exploitation in the UAE. According to a 2020 Freedom House report, at least nine other faculty members from NYU have been denied entry to teach or conduct research at NYU's Abu Dhabi campus. According to the report, the UAE authorities have also placed scholars and students who have criticized aspects of government policy on a unified Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) security blacklist, barring them from the wider region. Two NYU faculty members, journalism professor Mohammed Bazzi and professor on Middle Eastern politics Arang Keshavarzian, whose visas to the UAE were denied without justification, believe that it was in part because they are Shia Muslims, an affiliation they were asked to disclose on their visa applications.

The University of Cambridge describes its mission as to "contribute to society through the pursuit of education, learning and research at the highest international levels of excellence" and it lists its two core values as "freedom of thought and expression" and "freedom from discrimination." Five years after Egyptian National Security agents abducted, tortured, and brutally murdered Italian graduate student Giulio Regeni in Cairo while he was pursuing field research for a doctoral degree at the University of Cambridge, the university's administration said in a statement: "we also stand,

more firmly than ever, with a global academic community united in its call for academic freedom without fear of persecution." We would challenge the notion that any institution founded on the aforementioned core values can expect to fulfill its mission effectively in a country where individuals espousing or practicing these values are at risk of arbitrary detention, torture, unfair trials, and long prison sentences. Likewise, it is difficult to see how the University can issue such calls for academic freedom while partnering with a government to whom such freedom is anathema.

Given the UAE's longstanding intolerance for criticism and free exchange of ideas, it is our view that the University of Cambridge risks complicity in whitewashing the UAE's poor human rights record through the proposed partnership. The UAE has long recognized the soft power of partnerships with reputable academic institutions and the manner in which these partnerships can be used to shape perceptions of their policies. Academic partnerships can be hugely beneficial, not least in promoting cultural exchange, but when states use these partnerships for political ends, for example to whitewash poor human rights records, they can hamper efforts to hold states accountable for their abuses.

We note that the UAE government has derived reputational benefits from its relationship with NYU and the Sorbonne since the founding of their offshore campuses in Abu Dhabi in 2010 and 2006 respectively, helping promote an image of the government as open and tolerant. In November 2019, Laurence Renault, acting executive director of academic affairs at Sorbonne Abu Dhabi, [said in a print interview](#): "The United Arab Emirates is a rapidly developing, forward-looking country that cultivates the value of tolerance, promoting dialogue between cultures and bringing people together, which fundamentally connects to the ethos of SUAD in being 'a bridge between civilisations.'" In his 2016 keynote address to the NYU Abu Dhabi class of 2016, UAE Ambassador to the US Yousef Al Otaiba praised graduates for their bold thinking, willingness to take risks, and openness to other people and perspectives, falsely claiming that those are the values of the UAE itself. "Here in the UAE we're seeking to create a place where people from all backgrounds, faiths, nationalities, and perspectives can join together to learn, to engage in artistic expression, to exchange ideas. And yes, to disagree. It's ok to disagree, respectfully," [he said](#).

We believe that the University of Cambridge needs to guarantee that its brand will not be used as a part of a project to whitewash the human rights reputation of the UAE government in a similar way. Steps it should take, at a minimum, include demanding that the UAE offers clear public support to guarantee the protection of academic freedom, pledging not to censor anyone affiliated with the university from publicly criticizing the UAE authorities, obtaining a guarantee from UAE authorities that university-affiliated professors and students are not denied entry to the UAE for their criticism, publicly speaking out in support of imprisoned human rights defenders and activists and calling for an end to systematic human rights abuses by the UAE government. We invite you to set out what steps you are taking to ensure this. If the University of Cambridge is not able to guarantee this, we believe you should not proceed with this partnership.

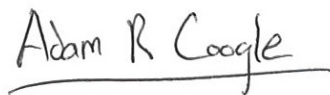
One Emirati activist who lives in exile in the UK after being tried in absentia as part of the unfair trial of 69 dissidents in 2013 who spoke to Human Rights Watch and FairSquare described this proposed partnership as a “repudiation of the noble principles that must be respected by a prestigious and respected educational institution like the Cambridge,” and said that it would “make the university an unreliable center for transferring and respecting educational values.”

A second Emirati, who spoke under condition of anonymity said the partnership would be “extending legitimacy to a state that has shown the utmost derision and contempt for human rights, basic civil liberties and independent scholarship” and that the University would be “auctioning its credibility and academic integrity to a country with whom an association can only deliver reputational peril.”

Given the way in which the UAE authorities have sought out strategic partnerships with other educational institutions and high-profile sporting institutions and the political value that they attach to these relationships, we believe that the UAE’s primary interest in this venture will be in furthering its own brand and image as well as whitewashing its poor human rights record through this association with the University of Cambridge. As elite universities across the world, including your own, grapple with their complex histories and commit to examining their role in perpetuating deep-seated social and racial inequalities, we believe they should stand as a bulwark against state repression, not as handmaidens to authoritarianism.

We would welcome the opportunity to brief you either in person or remotely on the issues raised in this letter and we will also be looking to provide briefings to any faculty, students and alumni who are interested in knowing more about the UAE’s human rights record and the implications of this partnership. Please do not hesitate to contact us via email at cooglea@hrw.org and james@fairsq.org should you have questions or would like to set up a meeting.

Sincerely,



Adam Coogle
Deputy Director
Middle East and North Africa
Human Rights Watch



James Lynch
Founding Co-Director
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