



WELL of FEAR

extraction and autocracy in the UAE

a briefing on political repression for COP28 attendees



meaningful steps to stem global demand for fossil fuels would present a real threat to the power of the UAE's ruling family

This page: Coins of the United Arab Emirates, oil derricks depicted in the UAE 50 fils coin, © Wrangel/Dreamstime.com. Opposite page: (top) Oil well in desert, UAE, © Lukás Holub/Dreamstime.com. (bottom) UAE President Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahyan and Sultan Ahmed Al Jaber, Managing Director and CEO of the Abu Dhabi National Oil Company (ADNOC). Al Jaber is the COP28 President, © Abaca Press/Alamy Stock Photo.

Over the last decade the UAE's model of authoritarian stability, underpinned by its massive fossil fuel revenues, has turned it into a deeply repressive surveillance state, where the red lines of acceptable expression have been so starkly redrawn that it is now clear to citizens and non-citizens alike that no meaningful critique of the country's leadership or society is permissible. Any Emirati who has dared to offer even mild criticism of its rulers has been forcibly disappeared, locked up, exiled, or bullied into silence. The UAE's ruling family backs authoritarian and anti-democratic forces around the world, from Libyan warlords to Donald Trump and Egypt's Abd el-Fattah el-Sisi. It operates a highly sophisticated and well-resourced public relations operation to maintain the illusion that it is progressive and tolerant. Western governments, reliant on the country's fossil fuels and related investments, seek close collaboration with Abu Dhabi and provide it with weaponry and military backing. This human rights brief – designed to provide important context for COP28 participants – sets the grim and relentless crackdown of the past decade in the context of the UAE's social contract, which expects citizens to demonstrate absolute political quiescence in return for a share in the benefits of continued fossil fuel extraction. It argues that meaningful steps to stem global demand for fossil fuels would present a real threat to the power of its UAE's ruling family, and that COP participants should be alive to this as they work with the presidency to achieve the best possible outcome from COP28.

Oil and Power

The United Arab Emirates (UAE) is a federation of seven semi-auto-nomous emirates on the southern coast of the Arabian Gulf, which became fully independent from the British Mandate in 1971. Abu Dhabi is the wealthiest and most powerful of the seven and its rulers, from the Al Nahyan family, have always held the Presidency of the UAE. Abu Dhabi's oil and gas fields fuelled the UAE's tremendous economic growth under the leadership of the 'father of the nation' Sheikh Zayed. In 2008, when the emirate of Dubai suffered a real estate crash sparked by the Global Financial Crisis, Abu Dhabi provided it with a \$20 billion bailout, further cementing its dominant political position within the UAE. Political parties are banned throughout the country, and the political system grants the emirates' hereditary rulers a monopoly on power and excludes the possibility of a change in government through elections.

Starting in the 1970s, the Gulf states wrested control of their oil and gas reserves back from western oil companies, and their monarchs used the vast sums of money they earned from this to develop their countries very rapidly. Politically, US academic Jim Krane describes how the region's ruling families "used their expropriation of the global oil business to fortify control ... these countries became more autocratic as they developed, not less." The power that the UAE's rulers wield is rooted in their complete control over its oil and gas reserves. Oil and gas exports account for around 90% of UAE government revenue, the distribution of which ensures the fealty of elites and staves off the threat of dissent from below. Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan (often known as "MBZ"), de facto ruler of the country since the 2000s and formally President since 2022, has constructed a social contract which guarantees the distribution of state-controlled oil revenues to citizens who, in return for a high standard of living and generous welfare packages, have tended to exercise what Emirati academic Mira Al Hussein describes as "voluntary disinterest in political participation". One journalist has described this as the ruling family's "tacit deal with their people: safety and prosperity in exchange for quiescence."



Meaningful steps to stem global demand for fossil fuels would present a real threat to the sustainability of the UAE regime and the power of its ruling family. Conversely, increases in energy demand, such as the one driven by the conflict in Ukraine, increase revenues and bolster domestic power, boosting the state's Sovereign Wealth Fund and thus diversifying the sources of revenue of the ruling elites. Autocracy requires extraction and extraction fuels autocracy. The appointment of Sultan al-Jaber, CEO of ADNOC – the national oil company chaired by MBZ – as COP28 President should be seen within this political framework. Announcing a major expansion of ADNOC's oil production capacity in late 2022, al-Jaber made clear that the UAE fully intends to keep pumping more oil: "The world needs maximum energy, minimum emissions and it needs all the energy solutions if we are to ensure global energy security."

Climate Change and the UAE

Despite a PR campaign touting the state's credentials on renewable energy, Climate Action Tracker rates UAE's climate pledges as "highly insufficient". In April 2023, the NGO Urgewald produced analysis showing that the UAE has the third biggest net zero-busting plans for oil and gas expansion in the world, surpassed only by Saudi Arabia and Qatar.

With civil society prevented from developing and operating, the government is under no domestic pressure to alter its approach. In April 2023 the UAE Ministry of Education launched a school programme on climate change, focusing on "individual behaviours" and school greening efforts without a single mention of fossil fuels or carbon emissions. This is all the more concerning given that in Abu Dhabi, the number of days where air temperature exceeds 40°C will increase by 51% by the middle of the century if global temperatures increase by 1.5°C, and by 98% by the end of the century if they increase by 3°C. Awareness of this future among the UAE's citizens is limited. Indeed, entrenched beliefs attributing climate change, and particularly increases in rainfall in Arabia, to certain religious prophecies that suggest Arabia will turn green with meadows and rivers, have long circulated in the UAE media and even in schools. The continued exposition of these beliefs, which border on climate change denial, in the closely controlled UAE media, work to the benefit of a state that is reluctant to take any serious measures against oil extraction. The repression of independent voices and the absence of alternative perspectives makes public debates on climate change and the UAE's post-oil future impossible.

Climate activists have rightly raised the alarm about the potential for ADNOC, and by extension the UAE state, to capture the COP28 process. The forces threatening to derail the fragile chance of progress towards meeting 1.5 degrees are the same forces that are withholding even the merest glimpse of political agency from Emiratis.

Opposite: January 2020, car stuck in water in flooded streets of Dubai after a heavy downpour, © Katiekk2/istock.com.
Below: Oil rig at sunset, Mina Port, Abu Dhabi, UAE, © Manoj Attingal/Alamy Stock Photo.



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The post-2011 crackdown and the fate of critics

When the “Arab Spring” mass protests erupted across the region in 2011, toppling several autocrats, MBZ perceived a serious threat to his rule. In March that year, just weeks after Hosni Mubarak was toppled by Egyptian protesters, a group of 133 Emirati women and men put their names to a [petition](#) calling for democratic reform in the UAE, including the right to vote.

“The (petition) group calls for comprehensive reform of the Federal National Council (FNC), or parliament, including demands for free elections by all citizens in the method of universal suffrage.”

MBZ had always argued that the Arab world was not supposed to be democratic, telling [American diplomats](#) in 2007 that, “the Middle East is not California”. His response to this cautious petition was swift and brutal. His feared state security apparatus began sweeping up the most prominent domestic critics, smearing them as terrorist supporters or sympathisers, especially if they had any connection to political Islam. In order to carry out arrests, security agencies roamed the streets in custom-made [4x4s with shackles](#) built into the frame. In 2012, the International Bar Association described how the UAE authorities were “creating a [climate of fear among the legal profession](#)”.

As it launched its vicious crackdown, the UAE state increased its spending on subsidies and social benefits by [31 percent](#) in a single year. Emiratis faced the starkest of choices: to stay quiet and accept the benefits of extraction, or face an outright assault on them and their families.

2013 saw a pivotal moment in the sentencing of the “[UAE 94](#)”, a group of reform-minded lawyers, academics and activists, to up to fifteen years in prison after a grossly unfair mass trial. By the end of the 2010s, there was not a single independent human rights activist able to operate in the country. In 2016, **Ahmed Mansoor**, an engineer, poet and father of four who was by then known as the ‘last human rights defender in the UAE’, told an [interviewer](#):

“The UAE is living in the worst time of its history, in 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.”

In March 2017, shortly after he tweeted criticism of the Abu Dhabi government and of the Sisi government in Egypt, UAE security forces stormed Mansoor’s home in the middle of the night and took him to an unknown location. In 2018 a secret court handed him a 10 year sentence. For the past six years, this [internationally-renowned](#) champion



of human rights has been held in solitary confinement in a tiny, cold cell in Abu Dhabi’s Al Sadr prison, without access to reading materials or even a radio. [Human Rights Watch](#) reports that only after a 49-day hunger strike in 2019 did he secure the right to exercise three times a week and to have twice-monthly phone calls with his wife.

Many of those swept up by the police state are held at the Al Razeen prison, dubbed the “[Guantanamo of the UAE](#)”, where [torture](#) and ill-treatment has been extensively detailed. Inmates include **Dr Nasser bin Ghaith**, an economist and academic at the Abu Dhabi branch of the Paris-Sorbonne university. After being disappeared by the state in 2015, he was convicted in 2017 to 10 years in jail for tweeting about his own unfair 2011 trial.

Dr Mohammed Al-Roken was arrested as part of the UAE94 in 2012. A human rights lawyer with a PhD from the UK’s Warwick University and former head of the UAE Jurists Association, Al-Roken defended members of the Muslim Brotherhood and other political activists. He signed the 2011 democracy petition. He was sentenced to ten years in 2013, but remains in jail following the end of his sentence.

Al-Roken is not the only prisoner held beyond the end of his sentence: as at March 2023, [at least 51 detainees](#) from the UAE94 group were being held in a so-called “counselling” centre beyond the end of their sentences, under the UAE’s 2014 counterterrorism law which allows indefinite detention.



This page: (above) Prison cell bars, © Dan Henson/Dreamstime.com (left) Human rights activist Ahmed Mansoor, image courtesy of International Campaign for Freedom in the United Arab Emirates.

Opposite page: (top) Dr Nasser bin Ghaith, image courtesy of International Campaign for Freedom in the United Arab Emirates. (bottom) Dr Mohammed Al-Roken, image courtesy of International Campaign for Freedom in the United Arab Emirates.

“The UAE is living in the worst time of its history, in human rights. It’s the darkest era for the UAE”
– **Ahmed Mansoor, 2016**

As they have languished in prison, detainees' families have been targeted by the state, having their property confiscated, being deprived of jobs and not being allowed to complete their studies, having their citizenship revoked, and being at the receiving end of smear campaigns. **Osama al-Najjar** is the son of one of the UAE94 detainees. When he spoke out on Twitter about the practice of torture in UAE prisons and lobbied for improved prison conditions, he was sentenced to three years under the Cyber Crimes Law. His sentence was due to end in 2017, but he was held for two further years after his sentences, under the Counter-terrorism law. In this context, families often make the difficult choice to disown or distance themselves from relatives targeted by the state. Fearing reprisals, including the imposition of travel bans, many do not disclose the disappearances or incommunicado detention of family members. When human rights organisations call for prisoners' release, this can provide the state with a pretext to formally charge a detainee for "affiliation with a foreign entity".

An unknown number of people in the UAE are under state-imposed travel bans. There are no official channels through which to challenge travel ban procedures. In 2020, Emirati writer **Dhabiya Khamis** was placed under an indefinite travel ban after she criticised the UAE's normalisation of relations with Israel. She is not permitted to take part in public events, to publish any work locally, and cannot pursue a job, as employment in the UAE requires official security clearance.

Repression in the UAE is now so severe that even broadly established voices which used to offer some objective commentary on the state have seemingly changed their tone. Academic Abdulkhaleq Abdulla, a former adviser to MBZ, used to publicly question the lack of democracy in the country, and criticized the UAE-backed President Sisi of Egypt. Since he was briefly arrested in 2017, he has become a staunch defender of the UAE ruling family, writing on Twitter in 2021 that "after a decade of difficult confrontations, the UAE won the battle against the futility of the Brotherhood, and was able to halt its advance throughout the Arab world".

Mira Al Hussein argues that the whole of society, including the country's tribes which had played a role in decision making, was affected by the state's brutal response to the Arab Spring and notably the trial of the UAE 94:

"The spectacle of a public mass trial was sufficient to stunt society, inducing a spirit of deference intended to express unity in the rejection of an alternative political vision."

Emiratis can now only express themselves freely from outside the country, through diaspora groups such as the Emirates Detainees Advocacy Centre and the International

Campaign for Freedom in the United Arab Emirates, and regional organisations such as the Gulf Centre for Human Rights and ALQST for Human Rights' Alaa Al-Siddiq Unit. But even outside the country, they face coordinated social media abuse by pro-government accounts, as well as direct threats and harassment. In 2022, the UN Special Rapporteur on Human Rights Defenders called attention to the targeting of US resident Jenan Al-Marzouqi, who was receiving online and offline threats, including from members of the security apparatus, for her advocacy on behalf of her father and other detainees. Citizen Lab also revealed in 2021 that the late Emirati human rights activist, Alaa al-Siddiq, was surveilled by spyware likely initiated by the UAE, while she was living in the UK.

Foreigners also targeted

It is not only Emirati citizens who have found themselves in the crosshairs of the UAE police state. In May 2018, security forces seized British academic **Matthew Hedges** as he was preparing to leave the UAE following a research trip. In November that year, a court sentenced Hedges to life in prison for supposedly "spying" for the British government. Hedges said he was force-fed a cocktail of drugs during his imprisonment and was forced to sign a confession under extreme duress. After his case generated international outrage, the UAE pardoned Hedges. After his release he said that, "it has become clearer in the last year that any form of independent or critical thinking is now deemed a security threat to the state."

Foreign nationals regularly fall foul of the police state after inadvertently crossing red lines. In 2015, Australian **Jodi Magi** was shackled, strip-searched and deported from the UAE, after posting a photo on Facebook of a car parked across two disabled spots outside her Abu Dhabi apartment. Her case followed that of **Shezanne Cassim**, an American consultant who spent nine months in jail for making a satirical video deemed offensive to Emirati culture. In 2019, British national **Ali Issa Ahmad** reported that he was arrested, beaten, and tortured simply for having worn a Qatari football shirt to a match in Abu Dhabi, at a time when expressing support for Qatar had been declared a crime in the UAE. **Ahmed Etoum**, a Jordanian teacher who used his Facebook account to peacefully criticise his government, was seized by masked UAE security officers as he was walking with his children in 2020. He was held incommunicado and handed a ten-year sentence for "acts against a foreign state". **Tayseer Al Najjar**, a journalist also from Jordan, was imprisoned for two years for comments he made on Facebook before he even

lived in the UAE. Tragically he died in 2021, after his 2019 release from prison, having suffered from severe depression.

In the mid-2010s the UAE also implemented a policy of shutting its door to any potential critics from outside: since 2013, representatives of Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, British and American universities, and international media organisations have been denied entry to the state and placed on blacklists. In 2012, several foreign think tanks based in the UAE were ordered closed by the authorities, with no reason given.

Foreign institutions in the UAE know what is required for them to stay in the country: New York University Abu Dhabi refused to offer public support to Matthew Hedges when he was imprisoned, while the Sorbonne University Abu Dhabi explicitly distanced itself from the 2011 arrest of **Nasser bin Ghaith**, who taught programmes at the college, saying that his pro-democracy activities were "entirely external to his academic activities". In 2017 the Sorbonne Abu Dhabi student and Saudi women's rights activist **Loujain al-Hathloul** was seized by UAE security agents and deported to Saudi Arabia – later to be arrested and tortured. Institutions around the world called for her release, with the notable exception of the Sorbonne Abu Dhabi.



Foreign nationals regularly fall foul of the police state



(top right) Tayseer Al Najjar, image courtesy of International Campaign for Freedom in the United Arab Emirates
(middle right) Prisoner in handcuffs, © Fotokitas/Dreamstime.com
(bottom right) Members of the Army, Police and Security with a member of the Dubai ruling family, 2018, © Artur Wrdak/NurPhoto/Alamy Stock Photo (top left) Loujain al-Hathloul, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Loujain_Alhathloul.jpg, by unknown author, <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/deed.en>
(bottom left) Abu Dhabi Police officer on Hamdan Street, Abu Dhabi, © Fahd Khan/Alamy Stock Photo.

Surveillance

The UAE has been called a “[digital superpower](#)” because of its ability to project influence through technology. Even private criticism is dangerous, as the UAE has used its vast resources to implement one of the most advanced electronic surveillance networks in the world. Researchers at the Citizen Lab christened **Ahmed Mansoor** “the million dollar dissident” after they found highly sophisticated malware on his phone in 2016, prompting Apple to issue an urgent global update of the iPhone operating system. In what was later revealed to be called [Project Raven](#), the UAE state had employed more than a dozen former employees of the US National Security Agency, working through a company called DarkMatter, to develop the Karma platform, which allowed them to hack into hundreds of iPhones. **Loujain al-Hathloul** (see previous page) was one of those targeted by DarkMatter, before her arrest in the UAE.

In 2019 the New York Times also revealed that ToTok, a popular Emirati social media app downloaded millions of times, was actually a surveillance tool – the company’s owner was an Abu Dhabi-based company chaired by **Tahnoon bin Zayed Al Nahyan**, the highly influential national security adviser and brother of MBZ. The UAE’s deepening relationship with Israel, cemented with the 2020 Abraham Accords, has given it access to NSO’s Pegasus technology, which it used among other things to hack into the phone of the wife of **Jamal Khashoggi**, the exiled Saudi Arabian dissident who was brutally murdered by state agents in 2018.



Below: ToTok Messenger Lite mobile app icon logo on phone screen, © Postmodern Studio/Alamy Stock Photo.
Opposite: (top left) Activist holds a poster with the image of Jamal Khashoggi Indonesia, 2018, © Herwin Bahar/Dreamstime.com (top right) Oil rig and Petrochemical Ships at Khalifa Port Abu Dhabi, 2017, © Fahd Khan/Dreamstime.com (bottom) UAE designed Halcon Shadow 25 loitering munition system displayed in the EDGE pavilion during the International Defence Exhibition, Abu Dhabi, Feb, 2023, © Ryan Lim/Getty.



This human rights brief sets the grim and relentless crackdown of the past decade in the context of the UAE's social contract, which expects citizens to demonstrate absolute political quiescence in return for a share in the benefits of continued fossil fuel extraction





The Sanid petition

Ahead of COP28, more than 50 human rights and climate organisations from the Gulf region and beyond have called on the UAE to end its attacks on civil society, including by immediately releasing all those detained solely for the exercise of their human rights and ending restrictions on civic space. They also call on the state to ensure an ambitious and human rights-consistent outcome of COP28.

[Read the full Sanid petition here](#)

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