



[Rights Watchdogs Express Alarm at the United Arab Emirates' Arrest and Imprisonment Sentencing of Former Khashoggi Lawyer Asim Ghafoor](#)

During this past week, authorities in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) arrested Asim Ghafoor, the former lawyer of murdered journalist Jamal Khashoggi and a board member of the advocacy group Democracy for the Arab World Now (DAWN). Ghafoor was detained, and swiftly sentenced to a prison term, while transiting through Dubai on his way to Istanbul. DAWN and other rights watchdog organizations have voiced serious alarm over the incident, understandably outlining how the United Arab Emirates has been condemned for its track record of politically-motivated imprisonments, unjust trials, and repression of dissidents. They also highlighted the UAE's use of its legal system to persecute and punish critics. Ghafoor has rejected the alleged charges, and stated he was unaware that the UAE had supposedly convicted him at some point in the past in absentia. Human rights groups have called on the Biden administration to secure the release of Ghafoor, with the United States disputing the UAE's explanation for his detainment whereby Emirati authorities tried to frame it as a "coordinated move with the U.S. to combat transnational crimes."

Ghafoor is a civil rights attorney based in Virginia who previously served as a lawyer for the late journalist Jamal Khashoggi and his fiancé, Hatice Cengiz. He was detained by plainclothes UAE security agents while traveling through Dubai International Airport, and was slated to continue on to his final destination of Istanbul to attend a family wedding. While waiting for his connecting flight to Turkey, the agents arrested Ghafoor, telling him that they needed to take him to Abu Dhabi "to clear a case against him." Upon receiving word of this and informing the U.S. State Department about Ghafoor's detainment, DAWN was assured that American officials were working to resolve the issue. Most troubling and questionable about the alleged charges is the fact that Ghafoor has expressed no knowledge of any legal matter against him in the UAE, and had even transited through Dubai International Airport less than a year ago without incident. Sarah Leah Whitson, Executive Director of DAWN, appropriately pointed out that "Detaining Ghafoor on the basis of an in absentia conviction without providing him any information, notice, or opportunity to defend against himself is a flagrant violation of his due process rights...Whatever trumped up legal pretext the UAE has cooked up for detaining Ghafoor, it smacks of politically-motivated revenge for his association with Khashoggi and DAWN, which has highlighted UAE human rights abuses and urged an end to arms sales to the country."

Adding to the uncertainty and suspicion surrounding the Ghafoor case is the UAE's track record of repression and human rights abuses. In a recent 2021 report, reputable rights organization Amnesty International delved into this, finding that government authorities there continued to commit serious human rights violations which included practices such as arbitrary detention, cruel and inhumane treatment of detainees, and suppression of freedom of expression. Furthermore, the UAE's use of arbitrary detainment went beyond just Emirati nationals and also threatened foreign nationals as well, with several high-profile cases where the latter were indefinitely imprisoned on dubious charges. Journalists and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) who attempted to report on these types of occurrences were quelled, and authorities informed the media not to circulate or disseminate any information that is not published by them.

All of this legitimately raises doubts about both the alleged crimes levied against Ghafoor, as well as the UAE's capabilities to provide him with due process and fair treatment. Thus, global rights groups have urged for the release of Ghafoor due to the UAE's history of jailing many individuals via unjust trials and questionable charges.