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Freedom House

Freedom on the Net 2017 - United Arab Emirates

Country:

United Arab Emirates (<https://freedomhouse.org/country/united-arab-emirates>)

Year:

2017

Status:

Not Free

Total Score:

69

(0 = Best, 100 = Worst)

Obstacles to Access:

13

(0 = Best, 25 = Worst)

Limits on Content:

23

(0 = Best, 35 = Worst)

Violations of User Rights:

33

(0 = Best, 40 = Worst)

Population:

9.3 million

Internet Penetration:

90.6 percent

Social Media/ICT Apps Blocked:

Yes

Political/Social Content Blocked:

Yes

Bloggers/ICT Users Arrested:

Yes

Press Freedom Status:

Not Free

Key Developments:

June 2016–May 2017

- Following a diplomatic crisis with Qatar, authorities blocked several Qatari-owned news sites that were deemed to promote the banned Muslim Brotherhood (see **Blocking and Filtering**).
- Academic Nasser Bin Ghaith received a 10-year prison sentence for several tweets deemed to ridicule, criticize, or defame the government. A journalist was also sentenced to three years for insulting state figures on Facebook (see **Prosecutions and Detentions for Online Activities**).
- Activist Ahmed Mansour was arrested in a raid for spreading sectarian hatred on social media; he has been repeatedly targeted with sophisticated spyware (see **Prosecutions and Detentions for Online Activities and Technical Attacks**).

- The government banned the use of VPNs for “criminal” purposes, potentially exposing users to jail time or fines of up to \$540,000 for trying to evade censorship and surveillance (see **Surveillance, Privacy, and Anonymity**).

Introduction:

Internet freedom declined in 2017 due to the passage of a new cybercrime law and the subsequent imprisonment of users for political speech on social media, including a 10-year sentence for human rights defender Nasser bin Ghaith.

The United Arab Emirates (UAE) is ranked second among Arab states in the UN ICT Development Index, although its place in the global rankings fell slightly over the past year.¹ (<https://freedomhouse.org/print/49871#sdfootnote1sym>) The telecommunications industry remains tightly controlled by the government, which holds large stakes in the country's two service providers. Close ties between the government and telecommunications companies enable restrictions on Voice-over-IP (VoIP), rampant censorship, and pervasive surveillance.

The state blocks access to political, social, or religious content, from pornography and gambling to political discussion and LGBTI (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or intersex) content. Self-censorship is pervasive on social media and state-run news sites generally refuse to cover controversial issues. Ordinary people are often arrested for seemingly innocuous activities, such as uploading a photo of a poorly parked car or livestreaming a fire in a skyscraper.

The digital media landscape is restricted by several laws with unnecessary or disproportionate restrictions on freedom of expression online. An anti-hate speech law provides for jail terms of up to 10 years for online speech deemed insulting to religious symbols or discriminatory to certain identities. Calls to change the ruling system may result in life imprisonment under the cybercrime law. The law was amended in August 2016 to criminalize use of a fraudulent IP address to “commit a crime or prevent its discovery,” leading many to wonder if using a virtual private network (VPN) to circumvent censorship could result in jail time. An antiterrorism law passed in 2014 provides harsh penalties for, among other things, undermining national unity or “publicly declaring one’s animosity... to the regime.” Together with a judiciary that lacks respect for international norms of free speech, these laws lead to nonviolent opposition activists being targeted under laws designed for terrorists and cybercriminals.

Despite the risk of heavy penalties, however, a few internet users continue to highlight human rights abuses and advocate on behalf of jailed activists on social media.

Obstacles to Access:

Emirati users enjoy a robust information and communication technology (ICT) infrastructure and high connection speeds. However, the major telecom companies are either fully or partially owned by state-owned, resulting in high prices and weak competition. Popular VoIP services are subject to blocking.

Availability and Ease of Access

The UAE is one of the world’s most connected countries. According to the International Telecommunication Union, internet penetration was at 91 percent by the end of 2016, up from 78 percent five years earlier. As of May 2017, there were 1,270,519 internet subscribers in the country, 99 percent of whom had broadband connections.² (<https://freedomhouse.org/print/49871#sdfootnote2sym>) The UAE has one of the highest mobile phone penetration rates in the region at 187 percent, representing over 19 million subscriptions.³ (<https://freedomhouse.org/print/49871#sdfootnote3sym>) The country ranked 35th in the 2016 UN ICT Development Index, behind only Bahrain among Arab States.⁴ (<https://freedomhouse.org/print/49871#sdfootnote4sym>)

Prices, however, are among the highest in the region, although relative to the country’s high gross national income per capita, broadband is affordable for most users.⁵ (<https://freedomhouse.org/print/49871#sdfootnote5sym>) With the provider Etisalat, a postpaid mobile plan with a 6 GB data allowance and 500 local minutes costs AED 150 (US\$ 40), while a prepaid plan with an allowance of 5 GB, plus 3 GB for over-the-top (OTT) services, costs AED 200 (US\$ 54). In April 2017, the regulator directed mobile operators to reduce rates for UAE residents roaming within the Gulf region, resulting in an average 18 percent drop in prices for consumers.⁶ (<https://freedomhouse.org/print/49871#sdfootnote6sym>)

In December 2016, the telecommunications provider Du conducted 40 Gbps speed tests using advanced fiber-optic technology developed by Nokia.⁷ (<https://freedomhouse.org/print/49871#sdfootnote7sym>) Du currently offers speeds of 1 Gbps.⁸

(<https://freedomhouse.org/print/49871#sdfootnote8sym>) Etisalat and Ericsson successfully tested 5G mobile technology in May 2017,⁹ (<https://freedomhouse.org/print/49871#sdfootnote9sym>) in line with objectives to roll out 5G nationwide by the time Dubai hosts the Expo 2020 world fair.¹⁰ (<https://freedomhouse.org/print/49871#sdfootnote10sym>) Also in May, the regulator signed an agreement with the main ISPs “to facilitate raising the country's ranking into the top 10 countries on the National Readiness Index (NRI) in the World Technology Report.” Increased bandwidth and improved fixed-broadband services are expected to result.¹¹ (<https://freedomhouse.org/print/49871#sdfootnote11sym>)

According to UNICEF, literacy in the Emirates was reported at 94 percent among males and 97 percent among females, and thus does not constitute a strong obstacle to internet use.¹² (<https://freedomhouse.org/print/49871#sdfootnote12sym>) Emirati schools are among the top 25 worldwide for online connectivity. There are over 200 smart-learning schools, compared with only 14 in 2012.¹³ (<https://freedomhouse.org/print/49871#sdfootnote13sym>) The program currently benefits 34,513 students, who are also equipped with tablets as part of the scheme.¹⁴ (<https://freedomhouse.org/print/49871#sdfootnote14sym>) Principals are also enrolled in international computer literacy training programs.¹⁵ (<https://freedomhouse.org/print/49871#sdfootnote15sym>)

Restrictions on Connectivity

Most popular Voice-over-Internet-Protocol (VoIP) services are restricted over mobile connections. Etisalat and Du are the only operators licensed to provide paid VoIP services, while the free or low-cost over-the-top (OTT) voice calls services provided by WhatsApp, Skype, and others are only accessible through fixed-line or Wi-Fi connections. WhatsApp's voice feature was blocked shortly after it was introduced in March 2015,¹⁶ (<https://freedomhouse.org/print/49871#sdfootnote16sym>) as was a similar feature offered by Facebook.¹⁷ (<https://freedomhouse.org/print/49871#sdfootnote17sym>) Viber has been banned since 2013, along with FaceTime, a feature provided by Apple;¹⁸ (<https://freedomhouse.org/print/49871#sdfootnote18sym>) in fact, Apple agreed to sell its iPhone products to UAE mobile phone companies without the Facetime application preinstalled.¹⁹ (<https://freedomhouse.org/print/49871#sdfootnote19sym>) Users in the UAE reported that Skype and Viber only work over Wi-Fi and Apple's Facetime video-calling feature can only be used if the iPhone was purchased outside of the country.²⁰ (<https://freedomhouse.org/print/49871#sdfootnote20sym>) Discord, a chatting app used by gamers, had its VoIP feature blocked in March 2016;²¹ (<https://freedomhouse.org/print/49871#sdfootnote21sym>) Snapchat voice services were blocked in April.²² (<https://freedomhouse.org/print/49871#sdfootnote22sym>)

Using banned VoIP services through VPNs could be punishable under a law that bars the use of VPNs to commit a crime.²³ (<https://freedomhouse.org/print/49871#sdfootnote23sym>) Speaking in August 2016, the head of the Abu Dhabi Public Prosecution stated, “If a person uses VPN [sic] to make calls that are not available for users, they will be punished according to the cybercrime law rulings and telecommunications regulatory law.” Amendments to the cybercrime law passed that month raised the punishment for such activities to a fine between AED 500,000 and 2,000,000 (US\$ 140,000 to 540,000), jail time, or both.²⁴ (<https://freedomhouse.org/print/49871#sdfootnote24sym>)

No orders to shut down ICT networks were reported over the coverage period. However, cuts to undersea cables disrupted connectivity for users on several²⁵ (<https://freedomhouse.org/print/49871#sdfootnote25sym>) occasions.²⁶ (<https://freedomhouse.org/print/49871#sdfootnote26sym>) Internet service providers (ISPs) in the UAE are either fully or partially owned by the state, allowing authorities to exert control over the flow of information. Seeking to improve connectivity within the country, the Etisalat and Du have launched their own carrier-neutral international internet exchange points, called Smarthub and Datamena, respectively.²⁷ (<https://freedomhouse.org/print/49871#sdfootnote27sym>) Etisalat maintains its nationwide fiber-optic backbone. In 2015 the company selected TeliaSonera International Carrier (TSIC) as its preferred global internet backbone provider.²⁸ (<https://freedomhouse.org/print/49871#sdfootnote28sym>)

ICT Market

Both Etisalat and Du are either directly or indirectly owned by the state. The UAE government maintains a 60 percent stake in Etisalat through its ownership in the Emirates Investment Company,²⁹ (<https://freedomhouse.org/print/49871#sdfootnote29sym>) while a majority of Du is owned by various state companies.³⁰ (<https://freedomhouse.org/print/49871#sdfootnote30sym>) Du pays a percentage of its profits and revenue as a dividend to the federal government, which owns 39.5 percent of the operator through its sovereign wealth fund, the Emirates Investment Authority.³¹ (<https://freedomhouse.org/print/49871#sdfootnote31sym>) In June 2015, the government announced a decision to allow up to 20 percent of Etisalat shares to be held by foreign investors.³² (<https://freedomhouse.org/print/49871#sdfootnote32sym>)

The two companies are also the major mobile phone operators. In January 2017, Emirates Integrated Telecommunications Company (EITC), the company behind Du, stated it will launch a new mobile provider under the Virgin Mobile brand. Speaking to the media that month, the CEO of EITC clarified that since Virgin Mobile would fall under “the full ownership of EITC,” it would not require a separate license.³³ (<https://freedomhouse.org/print/49871#sdfootnote33sym>)

Regulatory Bodies

Providers fall under the laws and regulations set by the Telecommunications Regulatory Authority (TRA). The authority was established in 2003 and is responsible for the management of “every aspect of the telecommunications and information technology industries in the UAE.” Its objectives include ensuring quality of service and adherence to terms of licenses by licensees, encouraging telecommunications and IT services within the UAE, resolving disputes between the licensed operators, establishing and implementing a regulatory and policy framework, and promoting new technologies.³⁴ (<https://freedomhouse.org/print/49871#sdfootnote34sym>)

Limits on Content:

Authorities keep strict control over online media, blocking websites that criticize the government or tackle social taboos. Self-censorship is pervasive on social media and state-run news sites refuse to cover controversial issues. Families of political detainees highlight human rights abuses and communicate on behalf of their loved ones on Twitter, though they have also come under increasing pressure.

Blocking and Filtering

In May 2017, authorities blocked a number of Qatari media websites during a diplomatic crisis between Qatar and several Middle Eastern countries. Hackers posted a story on the Qatar News Agency website and related social media accounts that appeared to confirm a popular belief that the emir of Qatar supports political and terrorist groups that pose a threat to neighboring governments. Citing anonymous U.S. intelligence officials, the *Washington Post* said senior UAE officials orchestrated the hack in order to destabilize Qatar and justify breaking off diplomatic relations immediately after regional leaders were reported to have reached an accord at a landmark counter-extremism conference in Saudi Arabia.³⁵ (<https://freedomhouse.org/print/49871#sdfootnote35sym>)

The news sites were the latest of many linked to rival state and nonstate actors to be subject to blocking. Authorities separately blocked the Arabic *Huffington Post* website for alleged links to the banned Muslim Brotherhood in April.³⁶ (<https://freedomhouse.org/print/49871#sdfootnote36sym>) In 2015, authorities blocked the UK-based English-language news site *Middle East Eye* after it published articles exposing the country's harsh surveillance practices and poor human rights record;³⁷ (<https://freedomhouse.org/print/49871#sdfootnote37sym>) the Arabic-language news site *al-Araby al-Jadeed* and its English equivalent *The New Arab*, both based in the UK and funded by a Qatari businessman;³⁸ (<https://freedomhouse.org/print/49871#sdfootnote38sym>) and Arabic-language sites run by news agencies in Iran, such as Fars News and Al Alam TV, over allegations they disseminated antigovernment propaganda, according to the Arabic Network for Human Rights Information.³⁹ (<https://freedomhouse.org/print/49871#sdfootnote39sym>)

In December 2016, Emirati authorities blocked the encrypted messaging app Signal.⁴⁰ (<https://freedomhouse.org/print/49871#sdfootnote40sym>) Other blocked websites include the Beirut-based Gulf Center for Human Rights;⁴¹ (<https://freedomhouse.org/print/49871#sdfootnote41sym>) an anonymous forum for employees of Emirates Airlines;⁴² (<https://freedomhouse.org/print/49871#sdfootnote42sym>) an LGBTI sports news website (Outsports);⁴³ (<https://freedomhouse.org/print/49871#sdfootnote43sym>) the Lebanese queer and feminist e-magazine *Bekhsoos*;⁴⁴ (<https://freedomhouse.org/print/49871#sdfootnote44sym>) the U.S.-based Arab Lesbian e-magazine *Bint El Nas*;⁴⁵ (<https://freedomhouse.org/print/49871#sdfootnote45sym>) several political blogs;⁴⁶ (<https://freedomhouse.org/print/49871#sdfootnote46sym>) an Arab-Christian forum;⁴⁷ (<https://freedomhouse.org/print/49871#sdfootnote47sym>) a number of atheist and secular websites;⁴⁸ (<https://freedomhouse.org/print/49871#sdfootnote48sym>) sites disseminating news on Emirati political detainees and prison conditions;⁴⁹ (<https://freedomhouse.org/print/49871#sdfootnote49sym>) a blog operated by the stateless activist Ahmed Abdulkhaleq;⁵⁰ (<https://freedomhouse.org/print/49871#sdfootnote50sym>) and sites related to the Muslim Brotherhood and regional NGOs.⁵¹ (<https://freedomhouse.org/print/49871#sdfootnote51sym>) Users have reported the blocking of social media content relating to political detainees in the past;⁵² (<https://freedomhouse.org/print/49871#sdfootnote52sym>) as well as archive.today, a tool that keeps snapshots of URLs entered in case content disappears or gets modified.⁵³ (<https://freedomhouse.org/print/49871#sdfootnote53sym>)

The TRA officially instructs ISPs to block content related to terrorism, pornography, and gambling, as well as websites that contain political speech threatening to the ruling order. In practice, content on several other topics is restricted as well. The telecommunications company Du details what criteria it

uses to block websites in a document available on its website. Prohibited content includes information related to circumvention tools, the promotion of criminal activities, the sale or promotion of illegal drugs, dating networks, pornography, LGBTI content, gambling sites, unlicensed VoIP services, terrorist content, and material that is offensive to religion.⁵⁴ (<https://freedomhouse.org/print/49871#sdfootnote54sym>) No similar list has been made available by Etisalat, although the company invites users to request that a website be blocked or unblocked.⁵⁵ (<https://freedomhouse.org/print/49871#sdfootnote55sym>) Du also allows users to complete an unblocking request via online forms. However, neither company provides information on whether bans have been lifted in response to such requests.⁵⁶ (<https://freedomhouse.org/print/49871#sdfootnote56sym>) Twitter users sometimes monitor when sites are blocked to combat the lack of transparency,⁵⁷ (<https://freedomhouse.org/print/49871#sdfootnote57sym>) but the TRA has also called on social media users to help report “suspicious” content for blocking.

According to a report from Citizen Lab in January 2013, ISPs use advanced tools such as SmartFilter, NetSweeper, and Blue Coat ProxySG to censor content.⁵⁸ (<https://freedomhouse.org/print/49871#sdfootnote58sym>) CitizenLab has also documented websites that are blocked in the UAE because both SmartFilter (used by Etisalat) and NetSweeper (used by Du) have miscategorized them as pornographic.⁵⁹ (<https://freedomhouse.org/print/49871#sdfootnote59sym>)

Content Removal

Online content is often removed without transparency or judicial oversight. Under the cybercrime law, intermediaries, such as domain hosts or administrators, are liable if their websites are used to “prompt riot, hatred, racism, sectarianism, or damage the national unity or social peace or prejudice the public order and public morals.”⁶⁰ (<https://freedomhouse.org/print/49871#sdfootnote60sym>) Website owners and employees may also be held liable for defamatory material appearing on their sites.⁶¹ (<https://freedomhouse.org/print/49871#sdfootnote61sym>) In 2015, a TRA official said the regulator tries to “get the page or profile down or remove the violation as soon as possible” while criminal cases are reported to police.⁶² (<https://freedomhouse.org/print/49871#sdfootnote62sym>)

Facebook occasionally receives government requests to remove content, but last did so in 2014. The content related to “criticism of the government and the royal family.”⁶³ (<https://freedomhouse.org/print/49871#sdfootnote63sym>) Google received 10 requests to remove 51 items in the second half of 2016, complying in around 80 percent of cases. The majority of cases were categorized as “defamation.”⁶⁴ (<https://freedomhouse.org/print/49871#sdfootnote64sym>) Twitter reported 23 removal requests from the UAE government from July 2016 to June 2017, but withheld no content.⁶⁵ (<https://freedomhouse.org/print/49871#sdfootnote65sym>)

Media, Diversity and Content Manipulation

Since the regional uprisings of 2011, a number of Emiratis have begun to tackle sensitive issues more boldly over the internet, particularly on social media. However, most users remain anonymous when criticizing state officials or religion out of fear of legal action or harassment.

There are some signs of possible content manipulation. In 2014, the government spent more than \$12 million on public relation firms, which some observers suspect have been deployed to counter negative images of the country’s human rights abuses online.⁶⁶ (<https://freedomhouse.org/print/49871#sdfootnote66sym>) A large number of anonymously operated Twitter accounts appear dedicated to harassing and intimidating political dissidents and their families online.

Emirati authorities also use financial means to limit the ability of antigovernment websites to produce content online. For example, the government reportedly pressured Dubai-based advertising agency Echo to end its advertising contract with the U.S.-based news outlet *Watan*. A complaint was also allegedly submitted to the FBI against the website, claiming it calls for the assassination of UAE rulers.⁶⁷ (<https://freedomhouse.org/print/49871#sdfootnote67sym>) Nonetheless, users have access to a variety of local and international news outlets, even though some UAE-related articles may be individually blocked.⁶⁸ (<https://freedomhouse.org/print/49871#sdfootnote68sym>)

Local news websites, many of which are owned by the state, exercise self-censorship in accordance with government regulations and unofficial red lines. The overall press freedom environment is poor, and foreign journalists and scholars are often denied entry or deported for expressing their views on political topics.⁶⁹ (<https://freedomhouse.org/print/49871#sdfootnote69sym>) In February 2016, the Federal National Council passed a bill regulating the National Media Council, a new federal government body affiliated with the cabinet that “has a corporate character and a mandate to undertake the

responsibilities of overseeing and supervising media in the UAE." The council is responsible for proposing regulations and "accrediting media outlets and their staff and activities including e-publishing."⁷⁰ (<https://freedomhouse.org/print/49871#sdfootnote70sym>)

Digital Activism

Some Emiratis push back against government repression through online activism. Activists have used online tools to highlight human rights violations or call for political reform. Families of political prisoners have in the past relied on Twitter to speak on behalf of detainees, document allegations of torture, and call for their release. However, the practice has become less frequent in recent years given escalating arrests and prosecutions. Osama al-Najjar was specifically detained for online advocacy on behalf of his detained father Hossein al-Najjar and other political detainees.⁷ (<https://freedomhouse.org/print/49871#sdfootnote71sym>)

Violations of User Rights:

Several laws, including the penal code, the anti-hate speech law, and the cybercrime law, are commonly exploited to deter free expression and violate the rights of users. Several prominent online activists were jailed over the coverage period, while both locals and foreigners were detained for social media posts, often in absurd circumstances. UAE residents believe that online communications are monitored and that surveillance is widely practiced with little judicial oversight.

Legal Environment

Article 30 of the constitution states that freedom of opinion "shall be guaranteed within the limits of law."⁷² (<https://freedomhouse.org/print/49871#sdfootnote72sym>) Since a series of regional mass uprisings in 2011, the UAE has followed countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) in passing legislation to criminalize criticism of the authorities online.⁷³ (<https://freedomhouse.org/print/49871#sdfootnote73sym>)

The cybercrime law criminalizes a wide range of legitimate online activities. Hefty fines and jail sentences can be handed down for gambling online, disseminating pornographic material, or sharing content that is perceived to violate another person's privacy, whether or not the content is verified.⁷⁴ (<https://freedomhouse.org/print/49871#sdfootnote74sym>) The cybercrime law also punishes offending the state and its rulers or symbols, and insulting religion. Calls to change the ruling system are punishable by life imprisonment. Authorities have repeatedly warned foreign nationals that they must also follow the country's restrictive laws.⁷⁵ (<https://freedomhouse.org/print/49871#sdfootnote75sym>)

Citing the need to curb hateful rhetorical and promote tolerance in order to combat terrorism, authorities passed Federal Decree Law No. 2/2015 (anti-hate speech law) in July 2015. However, several provisions in the law go beyond the punishment of hate speech or incitement to violence. By including insults to "God, his prophets or apostles or holy books or houses of worship or graveyards," the law paved the way for further punishment of individuals for expressing nonviolent opinions on religion. Penalties under the law range from jail terms of 6 months to 10 years and fines of AED 50,000 to 2,000,000 (approximately US\$ 14,000 to 550,000).⁷⁶ (<https://freedomhouse.org/print/49871#sdfootnote76sym>) Furthermore, while the law bans discrimination on the basis of "religion, caste, doctrine, race, color, or ethnic origin," it does not protect those persecuted on the basis of gender or sexuality.⁷⁷ (<https://freedomhouse.org/print/49871#sdfootnote77sym>) The law specifically includes speech made over online media.

The Terrorism Law No. 7, passed in 2014, includes punishments such as life imprisonment, death, and fines up to AED 100 million (US\$27 million) for terrorism offenses.⁷⁸ (<https://freedomhouse.org/print/49871#sdfootnote78sym>) Under the law, citizens may be charged with such broad crimes as undermining national unity, possessing materials counter to the state's notion of Islam, and "publicly declaring one's animosity or lack of allegiance to the state or the regime."⁷⁹ (<https://freedomhouse.org/print/49871#sdfootnote79sym>)

Articles 8 and 176 of the penal code are used to punish public "insults" against the country's top officials, and calls for political reform.⁸⁰ (<https://freedomhouse.org/print/49871#sdfootnote80sym>) Articles 70 and 71 of a 1980 publishing law prohibit criticism of the head of the state and of Islam or any other religion.⁸¹ (<https://freedomhouse.org/print/49871#sdfootnote81sym>) In February 2016, Dubai police reiterated that posting pictures of others without permission can lead to six months in jail and a fine between AED 150,000 and 500,000 (US\$ 41,000 and 136,000).⁸² (<https://freedomhouse.org/print/49871#sdfootnote82sym>)

Several court decisions have negatively impacted internet freedom. In June 2015, the Federal Supreme Court ordered the retrial of an individual for making insults over WhatsApp messages, increasing the original fine of AED 3,000 (around US\$ 800) to AED 250,000 (US\$ 68,000); the individual was also deported.⁸³ (<https://freedomhouse.org/print/49871#sdfootnote83sym>) In a separate December 2015 case, Dubai's Court of Cassation overturned a lower court's acquittal in a defamation case over a Facebook posting.⁸⁴ (<https://freedomhouse.org/print/49871#sdfootnote84sym>)

Prosecutions and Detentions for Online Activities

The UAE routinely jails individuals for posting political, social, or religious opinions online, and 2017 saw one of the highest prison sentences in recent years.

Dr. Nasser bin Ghaith was sentenced in March 2017 to 10 years in prison on a range of charges that primarily relate to nonviolent speech published online. Bin Ghaith is a human rights activist and former lecturer at the Abu Dhabi branch of the Paris-Sorbonne University.⁸⁵ (<https://freedomhouse.org/print/49871#sdfootnote85sym>) He was arrested after publishing comments on Twitter that criticized Egypt's security forces on the second anniversary of the August 2013 massacre of protestors at Cairo's Raba'a Square, and arbitrarily detained for nine months. In May 2016 he was formally charged with committing a “hostile act” against a foreign country under Article 166 of the penal code.⁸⁶ (<https://freedomhouse.org/print/49871#sdfootnote86sym>) He was also charged under Articles 28 and 29 of the cybercrime law for a sarcastic tweet about the state's tolerance of diverse religions,⁸⁷ (<https://freedomhouse.org/print/49871#sdfootnote87sym>) and another tweet saying he was “tortured and unjustly accused during a previous trial,” for which he was charged with damaging the state's reputation. His trial has been repeatedly adjourned.⁸⁸ (<https://freedomhouse.org/print/49871#sdfootnote88sym>) Bin Ghaith was previously arrested in 2011 for signing an online petition demanding political reform.⁸⁹ (<https://freedomhouse.org/print/49871#sdfootnote89sym>)

Jordanian journalist Taysir al-Najar was sentenced to three years in prison and an AED 500,000 (US\$135,000) fine for “insulting state figures” in March 2017.⁹⁰ (<https://freedomhouse.org/print/49871#sdfootnote90sym>) She had published a 2014 Facebook post that was critical of the authorities.

In March 2017, activist Ahmed Mansour was arrested for “spreading sectarianism and hatred on social media.”⁹¹ (<https://freedomhouse.org/print/49871#sdfootnote91sym>) Twelve security officers searched Mansour's house for electronic devices, confiscating laptops and cell phones belonging to him as well as his family members.⁹² (<https://freedomhouse.org/print/49871#sdfootnote92sym>) Mansour had written about censorship in the UAE on social media, among other topics.

Several foreigners were also sentenced to prison for social media posts under the country's harsh cybercrime laws:

- In April 2017, two Bahrainis were sentenced to three years in prison and an AED 500,000 (US\$ 136,000) fine for inciting sectarianism over a video they published on Instagram while in Dubai. The men were stopped by Saudi authorities while crossing the bridge back to Bahrain.⁹³ (<https://freedomhouse.org/print/49871#sdfootnote93sym>) In 2014, GCC governments signed an extradition pact as part of a wider security agreement.⁹⁴ (<https://freedomhouse.org/print/49871#sdfootnote94sym>)
- In March 2017, Jordanian journalist Taysir al-Najar was sentenced to three years in jail and a 500,000 fine for “insulting state figures” in a 2014 Facebook post critical of Emirati authorities.⁹⁵ (<https://freedomhouse.org/print/49871#sdfootnote95sym>)
- In March 2016, an Omani man was sentenced to three years in jail and fine of AED 50,000 (US\$ 13,500) for describing UAE soldiers killed in Yemen as “cowards” on WhatsApp. He will be deported after serving his sentence.⁹⁶ (<https://freedomhouse.org/print/49871#sdfootnote96sym>)
- In June 2016, the Abu Dhabi Court sentenced a foreign national to six months in jail and an AED 50,000 (US \$13,500) fine for sharing content on a file-sharing website. He will also be deported after serving his sentence.⁹⁷ (<https://freedomhouse.org/print/49871#sdfootnote97sym>)

Numerous Emirati users continue to serve long prison sentences for their online activities, mainly as a result of the UAE94 trials involving alleged members of the banned opposition movement al-Islah.⁹⁸ (<https://freedomhouse.org/print/49871#sdfootnote98sym>) They include Marwan Mohamed Ateej,⁹⁹ (<https://freedomhouse.org/print/49871#sdfootnote99sym>) Khalifa Al-Nuaimi,¹⁰⁰ (<https://freedomhouse.org/print/49871#sdfootnote100sym>) Rashid al-Shamsi,¹⁰¹ (<https://freedomhouse.org/print/49871#sdfootnote101sym>) Musabeh al-Rumaithy,¹⁰²

(<https://freedomhouse.org/print/49871#sdfootnote102sym>) Abdullah al-Hajri,¹⁰³
 (<https://freedomhouse.org/print/49871#sdfootnote103sym>) Omran al-Radhwan,¹⁰⁴
 (<https://freedomhouse.org/print/49871#sdfootnote104sym>) Abdulrahman Bajubair,¹⁰⁵
 (<https://freedomhouse.org/print/49871#sdfootnote105sym>) Khalifa Rabeiah, and Othman al-Shehhi.¹⁰⁶
 (<https://freedomhouse.org/print/49871#sdfootnote106sym>)

In November 2014, online activist Osama Al-Najjar was sentenced to three years in prison and fined US\$136,000 for tweets alleging that his father, who was imprisoned during the UAE94 trials, was tortured by security forces.¹⁰⁷ (<https://freedomhouse.org/print/49871#sdfootnote107sym>) He was found guilty of belonging to the banned political group al-Islah, spreading lies, and instigating hatred against the state through Twitter.¹⁰⁸ (<https://freedomhouse.org/print/49871#sdfootnote108sym>) As of March 2017, al-Najjar remained in detention despite having served out his three-year sentence.¹⁰⁹ (<https://freedomhouse.org/print/49871#sdfootnote109sym>)

Surveillance, Privacy, and Anonymity

Surveillance is widespread and there are limited privacy protections or opportunities for anonymous communication. Internet and mobile providers are not transparent about the procedures authorities use to access users' information. It's not clear that there is any legal oversight involved.

Amendments to the cybercrime law were passed in July 2016 state that “whoever uses a fraudulent computer network protocol address (IP address) by using a false address or a third-party address by any other means for the purpose of committing a crime or preventing its discovery, shall be punished by temporary imprisonment and a fine of no less than AED 500,000 (US\$ 136,000) and not exceeding AED 2,000,000 (US\$ 540,000),” or both.¹¹⁰ (<https://freedomhouse.org/print/49871#sdfootnote110sym>) The clause may refer to VPNs used to circumvent censorship, which help disguise the user's location. A prison sentence was not specified; however, considering that cyber violations will now be treated as crimes and not misdemeanours, prison terms would likely be at least three years under the law.¹¹¹ (<https://freedomhouse.org/print/49871#sdfootnote111sym>) The TRA clarified that “companies, banks and institutions are not prohibited from using VPNs,” adding that “the law can be breached only when internet protocols are manipulated to commit crime or fraud.”¹¹² (<https://freedomhouse.org/print/49871#sdfootnote112sym>)

Both Abu Dhabi¹¹³ (<https://freedomhouse.org/print/49871#sdfootnote113sym>) and Dubai hosted international cybersecurity conferences over the past year.¹¹⁴ (<https://freedomhouse.org/print/49871#sdfootnote114sym>) In August 2016, a Danish newspaper revealed that a Danish subsidiary of British defense contractor BAE Systems was selling surveillance equipment to UAE officials. The equipment was reportedly capable of deep packet inspection, “IP monitoring and data analysis” for “serious crime” and “national security” investigations.¹¹⁵ (<https://freedomhouse.org/print/49871#sdfootnote115sym>)

In February 2016, an official from Dubai police said authorities monitor users on 42 social media platforms.¹¹⁶ (<https://freedomhouse.org/print/49871#sdfootnote116sym>) A TRA official also stated, “We have started monitoring all the social media channels – all websites and profiles are monitored.”¹¹⁷ (<https://freedomhouse.org/print/49871#sdfootnote117sym>)

In April 2014, the Ministry of Interior announced plans to link ID cards with internet services and cell phones “to crackdown on child abusers.” An official stated “by linking ID cards with internet service providers, people's identities will be linked to the websites they visit.”¹¹⁸ (<https://freedomhouse.org/print/49871#sdfootnote118sym>) Mobile phone users were required to re-register personal information as part of a 2012 TRA campaign “My Number, My Identity” to retain service.¹¹⁹ (<https://freedomhouse.org/print/49871#sdfootnote119sym>) Cybercafe customers are also required to provide their ID and personal information.¹²⁰ (<https://freedomhouse.org/print/49871#sdfootnote120sym>)

Intimidation and Violence

Online activists in the UAE face arbitrary detention, enforced disappearances, and torture.¹²¹ (<https://freedomhouse.org/print/49871#sdfootnote121sym>) Nasser bin Ghaith reports being detained in poor conditions and subject to torture while on trial for online activities, including extended periods in solitary confinement.¹²² (<https://freedomhouse.org/print/49871#sdfootnote122sym>) In April 2017, he announced he would go on hunger strike to protest his mistreatment and unfair trial.¹²³ (<https://freedomhouse.org/print/49871#sdfootnote123sym>)

Activist Ahmed Mansour, who was detained in 2017, has been harassed for years. Authorities have frozen his bank accounts, put him under a travel ban, denied him a passport, and attempted to hack into his email accounts. When arresting him, security forces searched Mansour’s house and confiscated all electronic devices belonging to him and his family members.¹²⁴ (<https://freedomhouse.org/print/49871#sdfootnote124sym>)

Technical Attacks

Emirati activists have faced repeated technical attacks designed to trick them into downloading spyware. In May 2016, a report from the *New York Times* stated the UAE government paid the cybersecurity firm “Hacking Team” more than US\$ 634,500 to target 1,100 devices with spyware.¹²⁵ (<https://freedomhouse.org/print/49871#sdfootnote125sym>) Through a forensic investigation by cybersecurity expert Bill Marczak, Emirati human rights activist Ahmed Mansour discovered he had been repeatedly targeted with sophisticated spyware from FinFisher and Hacking Team. Mansour has since been arrested for his online speech (see “Prosecutions and Detentions for Online Activities”). A report by CitizenLab demonstrated five cases where arrests or convictions of users followed malware attacks against their Twitter accounts from 2012 to 2015.¹²⁶ (<https://freedomhouse.org/print/49871#sdfootnote126sym>)

According to a 2016 report by Symantec, the UAE was subject to the second highest number of cyberattacks in the Middle East, and the 15th highest worldwide,¹²⁷ (<https://freedomhouse.org/print/49871#sdfootnote127sym>) attracting five percent of global cyberattack traffic.¹²⁸ (<https://freedomhouse.org/print/49871#sdfootnote128sym>) In 2016, the TRA announced it had “successfully foiled 1,054 cyberattacks” targeting private companies, as well as government entities.¹²⁹ (<https://freedomhouse.org/print/49871#sdfootnote129sym>) In April 2016, Dubai police arrested foreign hackers accused of blackmailing five senior White House officials over emails.¹³⁰ (<https://freedomhouse.org/print/49871#sdfootnote130sym>)

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