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## United Arab Emirates

**Country:**

United Arab Emirates

**Year:**

2016

**Press Freedom Status:**

Not Free

**PFS Score:**

78

**Legal Environment:**

25

**Political Environment:**

30

**Economic Environment:**

23

### Overview

Although the United Arab Emirates (UAE) serves as a regional hub for international media and hosts satellite television networks that broadcast to the Arab world, the domestic media environment is tightly controlled. Nearly all media outlets serving Emirati audiences are either owned or heavily influenced by the authorities, and individuals who use internet-based platforms to publicize dissenting views or sensitive information increasingly face arbitrary detention or criminal prosecution.

### Key Developments

- A prominent Omani blogger was arrested at the UAE border in February 2015 after attempting to enter the country from Oman, and was subsequently charged with defaming the government.
- A number of news websites based abroad were blocked in the final months of the year following their critical coverage of the UAE and its regional allies.
- Multiple convictions, detentions, and enforced disappearances were recorded during 2015 as the government cracked down on expressions of dissent online.

## Legal Environment: 25 / 30

While the UAE constitution provides for freedom of speech, the government uses its judicial, legislative, and executive powers to limit this right in practice. UAE Federal Law No. 15 of 1980 for Printed Matter and Publications regulates all aspects of the media and is considered one of the most restrictive press laws in the Arab world. It authorizes the state to censor both domestic and foreign publications prior to distribution, and prohibits criticism of the government, UAE rulers and ruling families, and friendly foreign governments. The law also bans publication of information that “causes damage to the national economy.” Violations of the law can result in fines and prison sentences.

Defamation is a criminal offense. Journalists can also be prosecuted under other articles of the penal code and a cybercrime law that was tightened in 2012 through a presidential decree. The cybercrime law criminalizes the use of the internet to commit a range of offenses—including violating political, social, and religious norms—and subjects perpetrators to prison terms and fines. Although the law centers on information technology, it has detrimental implications for both traditional journalism published online and citizen journalism. Article 24 makes it a crime to use a computer network to “damage the national unity or social peace.” Article 28 of the law states that the publication or dissemination of information, news, or images deemed “liable to endanger state security and its higher interests or infringe on the public order” can be punished with imprisonment and a fine of up to 1 million dirhams (\$270,000). Under Article 29, “deriding or harming the reputation, stature, or status of the state, any of its institutions, its president or vice president, the rulers of the emirates, their crown princes or their deputies,” as well as a number of national symbols, is also punishable with imprisonment and a fine of the same amount. Article 41 allows the government to close websites related to the commission of these crimes.

In February 2015, the Omani blogger Muawiyah al-Rawahi was detained by UAE border security personnel after attempting to enter the country from Oman. He was held for months without charge before appearing in court for the first time in September. He was ultimately charged with defaming the country and its rulers over criticisms of the UAE government that he published on Twitter in 2013. He was referred to a hospital for examination in November after his legal team claimed he was suffering from psychological disorders, and his case remained ongoing at year’s end. Other social-media users were convicted for their online activity in 2015. In May, a local man was sentenced to 10 years in prison for operating a social-media account that was critical of the government; his electronic devices and various documents were confiscated. And in June, another Emirati man received a three-year prison sentence and a fine of 500,000 dirhams (\$136,000) for criticizing the judiciary on Twitter.

An antiterrorism law passed in 2014 includes vague language prohibiting any speech that “antagonizes the state,” among other offenses. This raised concerns that peaceful dissent or critical journalism could be punished as a form of “terrorism.” The law carries potential penalties including death, life in prison, and fines of up to 100 million dirhams (\$27 million).

Although there is a legal framework for access to public information, it is difficult to obtain official documents or data in practice, with government entities often rejecting or ignoring requests. There is no law guaranteeing freedom of information as a fundamental right.

The National Media Council (NMC) is responsible for licensing all publications and issuing press credentials to editors. Members of the council are appointed by the UAE's president, the hereditary ruler of Abu Dhabi. The UAE has four "media free zones" (MFZs)—areas in which foreign media outlets produce news content intended for foreign audiences—located in the emirates of Dubai, Abu Dhabi, Ras al-Khaimah, and Fujairah. The Dubai and Abu Dhabi MFZs host bureaus of international media outlets such as CNN, the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), Saudi-owned Al-Arabiya, and Agence France-Presse. Broadcast media outlets based in the MFZs are regulated by the Technology and Media Free Zone Authority, but are also subject to the 1980 press law and the penal code. All free zones must obtain approval from the NMC before licensing any print or broadcast activities.

### **Political Environment: 30 / 40 (↓2)**

Journalists, especially foreign journalists working for Emirati media outlets, have reported having their stories censored by their editors, most often when they are covering sensitive issues such as religion, politics, or foreign allies of the UAE. Foreign media outlets based in the MFZs operate with relative freedom, although some journalists have received vague threats regarding their reporting.

Online censorship is extensive. In 2015, the UAE appeared to take cues from its regional allies in blocking overseas news websites. For example, the country reportedly joined Saudi Arabia and Bahrain in blocking the Iranian-based Arabic news outlet Al-Alam in October, and in December, a week after a similar move by Saudi Arabia, the UAE blocked the London-based Arabic news outlet *Al-Araby al-Jadeed*, which is owned by a Qatari company and has been accused of supporting the Muslim Brotherhood. The UAE government appears more willing to leave English-language sites unfettered in order to burnish its international image, though it did block *Al-Araby al-Jadeed's* English sister publication in December. Internet users are directed to a proxy server that maintains a list of banned websites and blocks material deemed inconsistent with the "religious, cultural, political, and moral values of the country." Websites that are considered indecent include those featuring pornography, dating or personal advertisements, and LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender) content. Some websites based in Israel or covering religions other than Islam, notably the Baha'i faith, are also blocked. Many users reportedly employ circumvention tools, such as virtual private networks (VPNs), to access blocked content. However, in 2015 the police in Dubai affirmed that the use of VPNs is illegal and can lead to criminal charges.

Due to vaguely defined redlines on permissible speech, extreme forms of self-censorship are widely practiced. Emirati journalists often face warnings and threats if they push the limits of acceptable media coverage. However, noncitizen journalists account for the overwhelming majority of those working in the UAE, and they face harsher measures, including dismissal and deportation. In a notable recent case, Yasin Kakande, a Ugandan journalist for the English-language daily the *National*, lost his job in 2014 after he published a book that discussed self-censorship in the UAE. Moreover, the increasing frequency of arrests, convictions, and detentions without trial affecting critics of the government, particularly social-media users, has had a chilling effect on journalistic activity and free speech in general.

Although journalists, bloggers, and online activists are not often subject to overt acts of violence, many are arbitrarily detained by authorities and held for long periods of time with no apparent legal justification. For example, Obaid Yousef al-Zaabi, a blogger and activist, was acquitted in June 2014 of slander and other charges related to his online criticism of the government. However, he was never released following his trial, and at the end of 2015 he remained in detention in a hospital ward for prisoners in Abu Dhabi, suffering from chronic ailments. In February 2015, three Emirati sisters were detained without charge for three months after they published tweets drawing attention to their brother's conviction in a mass sedition trial in 2013. They were released without charge in May. And in August, security forces detained Nasser bin Ghaith, an outspoken academic, allegedly over his online criticism of the regime in Egypt, a UAE ally. Bin Ghaith's whereabouts and legal status were unknown at year's end.

### **Economic Environment: 23 / 30**

About a dozen newspapers are published in Arabic and English in the UAE, and there are several terrestrial-broadcast radio and television stations. Most media outlets are either government owned or have close government affiliations. The Arab Media Group and Dubai Media Incorporated serve as the Dubai government's media arm, publishing several newspapers and operating television and radio stations. Privately owned newspapers such as the Arabic daily *Al-Khaleej* and its English-language sister paper, *Gulf Today*, are heavily influenced by the government. Almost all Arabic-language broadcast media that target the domestic audience are state owned and provide only the official view on local issues. However, satellite television service is widespread and provides uncensored access to international broadcasts.

Most major papers receive government subsidies and rely predominantly on the official Emirates News Agency (WAM) for content and guidance on whether or how to cover sensitive local news. Only a small minority of working journalists are native Emiratis, and observers note that expatriate journalists with relatively good pay have little incentive to engage in risky critical or investigative journalism.

About 90 percent of the UAE population had regular access to the internet in 2014. There are two internet service providers, Etisalat and Du, both of which are owned and operated by state corporations. The UAE has an extremely high mobile-phone penetration rate, with nearly twice as many mobile subscriptions as residents; most users have internet-enabled smartphones, making such devices one of the most popular ways to receive news content.

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