

# United Arab Emirates

	2014	2015		
<b>Internet Freedom Status</b>	<b>Not Free</b>	<b>Not Free</b>	<b>Population:</b>	<b>9.4 million</b>
Obstacles to Access (0-25)	14	14	<b>Internet Penetration 2014:</b>	<b>90 percent</b>
Limits on Content (0-35)	22	22	<b>Social Media/ICT Apps Blocked:</b>	<b>Yes</b>
Violations of User Rights (0-40)	31	32	<b>Political/Social Content Blocked:</b>	<b>Yes</b>
<b>TOTAL* (0-100)</b>	<b>67</b>	<b>68</b>	<b>Bloggers/ICT Users Arrested:</b>	<b>Yes</b>
			<b>Press Freedom 2015 Status:</b>	<b>Not Free</b>

\* 0=most free, 100=least free

## Key Developments: June 2014 – May 2015

- The website of the Beirut-based Gulf Center for Human Rights, a nongovernmental organization, was blocked in January 2015 (see **Blocking and Filtering**).
- In August 2014, the president issued a new antiterrorism law containing overly broad definitions of terrorism—including 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” (see **Legal Environment**).
- Nasser al-Faresi and Osama al-Najjar were each sentenced to three years in prison for criticizing the judiciary’s handling of the “UAE 94” trials against political dissidents. Several others were imprisoned for nonviolent speech that was critical of state institutions (see **Prosecutions and Detentions for Online Activities**).
- In October 2014, details emerged over the arrest and subsequent deportation of Iyad el-Baghdadi—a Palestinian blogger, longtime UAE resident, and vocal human rights advocate—to Malaysia. A critic of both secular and Islamist political forces, el-Baghdadi was not formally charged with any crime and lacked the necessary travel papers to enter Malaysia, where he spent several weeks in detention (see **Prosecutions and Detentions for Online Activities**).
- In February 2015, Omani blogger Muawiyah Alrawahi was arrested while crossing the UAE border and, as of publication, remained in detention on charges of insulting the country and its rulers via Twitter. Three sisters also disappeared for three months following tweets in support of their imprisoned brother (see **Intimidation and Violence**).

## Introduction

The United Arab Emirates (UAE) maintains an authoritarian grip on both politics and telecommunications. The country's two mobile phone and internet service providers are either directly or indirectly owned by the state, reflecting a lack of checks and balances when it comes to surveillance and government requests to companies to hand over their customers' personal data. Ongoing crackdowns on users have increased self-censorship on social media and online news outlets, of which the most prominent are government-owned. Numerous websites are blocked and search results are filtered in order to prevent access to local and international voices that differ from the state line, particularly on political, religious, and sexual matters. Current legal restraints, coupled with a judiciary that fundamentally lacks independence, create a highly problematic legal environment where users cannot be guaranteed that their constitutional and internationally recognized rights will be upheld.

A new antiterrorism law was issued in August 2014, providing lengthy prison sentences for crimes such 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." The country's 2012 cybercrime law already contains punishments for offending the state, its rulers, and its symbols, or for insulting Islam and other religions. As such, nonviolent opposition activists are often targeted under laws designed to counter terrorists and cybercriminals. At least five users are serving seven to ten-year sentences for their online activities as part of the so-called "UAE94" trials targeting 94 alleged members and supporters of the banned political opposition group, al-Islah. Six social media users have since been sentenced to three to five years for criticizing the judicial process or calling attention to human rights abuses, often regarding their jailed family members. For instance, Osama al-Najjar was sentenced to three years in September 2014 for alleging that his father was tortured while in prison. Foreign nationals are also targeted under harsh laws regulating social media use, resulting in their arrest and often deportation.

The government has embraced information and communications technology (ICT) as a means of developing a competitive economy and improving citizen services. Indeed, the UAE is ranked 23<sup>rd</sup> in the World Economic Forum's 2015 Networked Readiness Index.<sup>1</sup> While remaining open to receiving large amounts of foreign investment and expatriate workers, the government has actively fought to deter political discussions, demands for reforms, and criticism of public officials online. The first reported instance of law enforcement bodies targeting ICT use for political motives occurred in July 2010, when an 18-year-old named Badr al-Dhohri was held in Abu Dhabi for using his Blackberry to pass along a message that called for a protest against increases to the price of gasoline.<sup>2</sup> Between 2011 and 2015, dozens have been detained for their political discussions on online forums and social media. Many have reported that they were held without charge, denied the right to an attorney, and in some cases, tortured.

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1 Soumitra Dutta, Thierry Geiger, and Bruno Lanvin, eds., *The Global Information Technology Report 2015*, World Economic Forum, 2015, <http://bit.ly/1OxbqGC>.

2 Reporters Without Borders, "Wave of Arrests of Blackberry Messenger Users," July 29, 2010, [http://bit.ly/1NecX19\\_](http://bit.ly/1NecX19_).

## Obstacles to Access

Similarly to other Gulf States, Emirati users enjoy a robust information and communications technology (ICT) infrastructure and high connection speeds. The ITU's *Measuring the Information Society (MIS) 2014* report ranked the UAE 32nd in the world.<sup>3</sup> Similarly, the UAE is ranked 23rd in the World Economic Forum's *2015 Networked Readiness Index*.<sup>4</sup> However, market conditions are not free, with top telecoms fully or partially owned by state entities.

## Availability and Ease of Access

While the use of broadband is widespread, prices are extraordinarily high; the UAE has one of the most expensive broadband rates in the world, with high-end subscriptions costing more than AED 8,000 (US\$2,178) a year. However, the UAE ranks 22nd in the ITU's 2014 ICT Price Basket Index, in which local broadband prices are measured against, gross national income (GNI) per capita.<sup>5</sup> This reflects a sense that despite the high prices, the internet remains affordable for most Emiratis, though not necessarily to all migrant workers.

The number of internet users has risen rapidly from a penetration rate of 61 percent in 2007 to 90.4 percent in 2014 according to the Telecommunications Regulatory Authority (TRA).<sup>6</sup> The expansion of wireless broadband penetration has doubled from 45 percent (in 2012) to 90 percent (in 2013).<sup>7</sup> As of February 2015, there were 1,145,216 internet subscribers in the country, 99 percent of whom had broadband connections.<sup>8</sup>

The UAE has one of the highest mobile phone penetration rates in the region at nearly 178 percent representing 16.8 million subscriptions in 2014.<sup>9</sup> In 2014, the Emirates ranked first in smartphone penetration in the Middle East region with 60.9 percent of total users.<sup>10</sup>

Etisalat upgraded broadband speed twice, once in September 2014 and again in April 2015 for 100,000 business clients.<sup>11</sup> In March 2015, Etisalat signed a partnership with Ericsson at the Mobile World Congress in Barcelona to implement 5G technology making the UAE the first in the region to take this step.<sup>12</sup>

According to UNICEF, literacy in the Emirates was reported at 94 percent among males and 97 per-

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3 "UAE among most dynamic countries: ITU report." *Arabian Gazette*. Nov 25, 2014.

4 Soumitra Dutta, Thierry Geiger, and Bruno Lanvin, eds., *The Global Information Technology Report 2015*, World Economic Forum, 2015, <http://bit.ly/1OxbqGC>.

5 International Telecommunications Union, *Measuring the Information Society Report 2014*, <http://bit.ly/1FIOBfF>.

6 International Telecommunication Union, "Percentage of individuals using the Internet," 2001 and 2012, accessed June 2, 2013, <http://bit.ly/1cblxxY>.

7 International Telecommunication Union, "ICT Development Index (IDI)," in *Measuring the Information Society Report 2015*, <http://bit.ly/1xrVMi8>.

8 Telecommunications Regulatory Authority, "Latest Statistics," accessed July 10, 2015, <http://www.tra.gov.ae/latest-statistics.html>.

9 International Telecommunication Union, "Percentage of individuals using mobile-cellular subscriptions," 2012, accessed June 2, 2013, <http://bit.ly/1cblxxY>

10 eMarketer, "United Arab Emirates Leads Middle East and Africa in Mobile Phone Penetration," February 5, 2015, <http://bit.ly/1y0XCq9>.

11 "Etisalat freebie: 50% broadband speed boost," *Emirates* 24/7, April 18, 2015, <http://bit.ly/1OEvjk2>.

12 Joseph George, "5G coming to UAE soon with 115Gbps internet speed," *Emirates* 24/7, March 6, 2015, <http://bit.ly/1ARQw-FI>.

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cent among females, and thus does not constitute a strong obstacle to internet use.<sup>13</sup> UAE schools are now among the top 25 worldwide for online connectivity. There are now 123 smart-learning schools, compared with only 14 in 2012. The program benefits 11,402 students, who are also equipped with tablets. The ministry has also completed the e-content project in both English and Arabic. Principals are enrolled in international computer literacy training programs.<sup>14</sup> By 2017, the country expects its Smart Learning Program to be installed in all K-12 government school classes; replacing textbooks with tablets and allowing students to interact with educators through an online platform.<sup>15</sup>

## Restrictions on Connectivity

In the Emirates, internet service providers (ISPs) are owned by the state. In 2008, Etisalat had announced the rollout of its nationwide fiber optic backbone. This May, Etisalat selected TeliaSonera International Carrier (TSIC) as its preferred global internet backbone provider under a framework deal.<sup>16</sup>

The country's two internet service providers—Etisalat and du—have launched their own carrier-neutral international internet exchange points, Smarthub and Datamena, respectively.<sup>17</sup> Cuts to undersea cables have disrupted internet access for Emirati users on several occasions, though government-instituted outages are not known. In November 2013, du issued a statement that submarine cables were experiencing faults affecting their internet bandwidth.<sup>18</sup> In March 2013, Etisalat warned that users would face slower speeds due to the cutting of a fiber-optic cable off of the Mediterranean coast of Egypt.<sup>19</sup> Du suffered similar disruptions in April 2010 and March 2011 due to cuts to the SEA-ME-WE 4 cable.<sup>20</sup> In 2008, 1.7 million users in the UAE were affected by undersea damage to submarine cables occurring at five separate locations around the globe.<sup>21</sup>

## ICT Market

Both Etisalat and du are, 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,<sup>22</sup> while a majority of du is owned by various state companies.<sup>23</sup> In June 2015, the government announced a decision to allow up to 20 percent of Etisalat shares to be held by foreign investors.<sup>24</sup> The two companies are also the major mobile phone operators.

13 UNICEF, "United Arab Emirates: Statistics," December 31, 2013, accessed at June 25, 2013. <http://uni.cf/lxga0>.

14 "2013 a banner year in UAE education," *The National*, January 1, 2014, <http://bit.ly/JBsX1i>.

15 Roberta Pennington, "Smart Learning Programme transforms education in UAE's government schools," *The National*, January 13, 2014, <http://bit.ly/1RcvDiz>.

16 "Etisalat selects TeliaSonera International Carrier as global internet backbone provider," *Telegeography*, March 11, 2015, <http://bit.ly/1LOBrKN>.

17 "Etisalat launches internet exchange hub," *CommsMEA*, November 19, 2012, <http://bit.ly/1hfcJEE>.

18 Abbas Jafar Ali, "Internet speed in UAE effected as du reports cable cut," *tbreak media*, November 14, 2013, <http://bit.ly/1PiVoAd>.

19 Claire Valdini, "UAE Etisalat users face disruption after cable cut," *Arabian Business*, March 28, 2013, <http://bit.ly/1Oxcz0O>.

20 SeaMeWe-4 refers to the South East Asia – Middle East – Western Europe – 4 cable. Hassan Hassan, "Cable cut may slow internet," *The National*, March 27, 2011, <http://bit.ly/1RJT6Zm>.

21 Asma Ali Zain, "Cable damage hits 1.7m Internet users in UAE," *Khaleej Times*, February 5, 2008, <http://bit.ly/1dS8tLD>.

22 Maher Chmaytelli, "Etisalat Plans to Allow Foreigners 'Soon,' *Khaleej Says*," *Bloomberg Business*, July 29, 2012, <http://bloom.bg/1NJ7wdM>.

23 du, "Shareholders structure," accessed June 7, 2013, <http://www.du.ae/en/about/corporate-governance/shareholders>.

24 Rory Jones, "UAE to Allow Foreign Ownership of Etisalat Shares," *Wall Street Journal*, June 23, 2015, <http://on.wsj.com/1Lv-nQo0>.

## 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.<sup>25</sup>

In March 2015, the TRA and Dubai police launched the campaign “Digital Blackmail” calling on users to report incidents of cybercrime and blackmailing, which are punished with ten years in jail. An official from the Department of Cybercrime at Dubai Police said the police received 81 complaints in 2013 and registered 59 cases. The figure went up in 2014 with 212 complaints received and 73 cases registered.<sup>26</sup>

In extension of its “My Number, My Identity” campaign launched back in June 2012, the TRA called on users to “reregister their SIM cards before documents expire” to avoid cancellations. The Authority said the move was “the result of studies that suggested an increase in civil and criminal cases related to the misuse of SIM cards.”<sup>27</sup>

## Limits on Content

*Online censorship has increased in the UAE following the Arab uprisings of 2011 as authorities blocked numerous websites and web forums where users openly call for political reforms or criticize the government. While self-censorship is pervasive, the ongoing crackdown against online dissent points to the fact that a limited number of users continue to use their real names when addressing sensitive issues. The families of political detainees use social media to highlight human rights abuses and communicate on behalf of their loved ones. The refusal of state-run news sites to cover controversial issues and trials has increased the importance of Twitter. These factors contribute to a highly controlled online environment in which freedom of expression and the right to information is not respected.*

## Blocking and Filtering

The TRA instructs ISPs to block content related to terrorism, pornography, and gambling, as well as websites that contain political speech threatening to the ruling order. According to Herdict, the crowdsourcing tool that lets users report blocked content, internet users from the UAE have reported several social, political, LGBTQ, dating, and proxy sites blocked in their country.<sup>28</sup>

In December 2014, a website run by anonymous employees of Emirates airlines was reported to be blocked in the country.<sup>29</sup> The website of Beirut-based NGO Gulf Center for Human Rights was

25 Telecommunications Regulatory Authority, “Brief History,” accessed Oct 1st, 2015, <http://www.tra.gov.ae/brief-history.html>.

26 Matovu Abdallah Twaha and Mohan Vadayar, “Public urged to report cybercrimes,” *Gulf Today*, March 10, 2015, <http://bit.ly/1G1kksY>.

27 “Re-register your SIM cards before documents expire,” *Khaleej Times*, July 28, 2015, <http://yhoo.it/1k6ZvT7>.

28 Herdict, “Quick Stats: United Arab Emirates,” accessed January 14, 2014, <http://www.herdict.org/explore/indepth?fc=AE>.

29 Blog no longer active: *Emirati Illuminati* (blog), <http://www.emirates-illuminati.org/uae-blocks-emirates-illuminati/>.

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blocked in January 2015.<sup>30</sup> On Reddit, users reported the blocking of archive.today, a tool that keeps snapshots of URLs entered in case content disappears or gets modified.<sup>31</sup> iHerb.com, an online retailer of nutritional supplement and wellness products, was reported to have been banned in June 2015.<sup>32</sup>

The telecommunications company du details what criteria it used 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, homosexuality, gambling, phishing, spyware, unlicensed VoIP services, terrorism, and material that is offensive to religion.<sup>33</sup>

No similar list was made available by Etisalat, although the company does have a space on its website where users can request that a website be blocked or unblocked.<sup>34</sup> In 2005, an Etisalat spokesman stated that the company is not responsible for internet blocking and revealed that all complaints and requests are passed on to the Ministry of Information. He also claimed that a list of websites to be blocked is compiled by an American company and then implemented through a proxy server.<sup>35</sup> Etisalat and du have responded to Twitter users about unblocking inquiries by asking them to fill certain online forms, yet there is no information on whether bans have been lifted in response.<sup>36</sup>

The TRA, working with the Ministry of Communications, has also blocked five hundred search terms.<sup>37</sup> An Emirati blogger tweeted that unblocking requests do not get responses from providers.<sup>38</sup> Users have also reported blocked Twitter content such as political hashtags relating to local detainees.<sup>39</sup> Blogger Ahmed Mansoor initiated a Twitter campaign using the hashtag #blocked\_sites\_in\_uae to reveal which websites were blocked by the TRA. Most websites blocked were related to political dissent such as the Muslim Brotherhood or regional NGOs.<sup>40</sup> According to the TRA, 82 percent of the websites blocked during the period from January to March 2015 were blocked for nudity and dating content, 8 percent for violating UAE laws, and 9 percent for containing phishing, hacking, and spyware content.<sup>41</sup>

Skype's download page and online forum continued to be blocked during the coverage period, alongside several proxy websites. In May 2015, several users reported the storytelling platform Wattpad blocked in the UAE.<sup>42</sup> Earlier in 2015, the dating app Tinder was blocked.<sup>43</sup> A similar app,

30 Gulf Center For Human Rights (GC4HR), "United Arab Emirates: GCHR website blocked in UAE," January 29, 2015, <http://bit.ly/1hGc1as>.

31 Reddit, "Archive.today blocked in UAE (United Arab Emirates)," November 21, 2014, <http://bit.ly/1VU6LTA>.

32 Expat Woman Forum, "iHerb website blocked?!" Forum Thread, June 18, 2015, <http://bit.ly/1LQIE8m>.

33 Du, "Prohibited Content Categories," July 29, 2008, <http://bit.ly/1LmaBKL>.

34 Etisalat, "Blocking and Unblocking Internet Content," accessed on April 28, 2013, <http://bit.ly/1Lc6l2u>.

35 Piers Grimley Evans, "Etisalat doesn't block websites," *Gulf News*, July 21, 2005, <http://bit.ly/1Lc6piU>.

36 See Etisalat\_Care, Twitter Post, December 30, 2015, 5:52 AM, <http://bit.ly/1LmlQD2>; and <https://twitter.com/dutweets/status/414787641620430848Evans>. [offline]

37 Reporters Borders, "Countries Under Surveillance: United Arab Emirates," accessed in June 25, 2013, <http://bit.ly/1LvCJyw>.

38 Hamoud Aissam, Twitter Post [in Arabic], October 28, 2014, 3:35 AM, <http://bit.ly/1Nep9Pz>.

39 Sallah, Twitter Post [in Arabic], May 5, 2015, 7:01 AM, <http://bit.ly/1hGrqYg>.

40 Twitter, Hashtag, #Blocked\_sites\_in\_UAE, <http://bit.ly/1RK5Q2a>.

41 Telecommunications Regulatory Authority, <http://www.tra.gov.ae/iam.html>.

42 Yahoo! Answers, "Why is wattpad blocked in UAE?" <http://yhoo.it/1Lc6Yt2>.

43 "Tinder app blocked by UAE's Etisalat," *Arabian Business*, January 19, 2015, <http://bit.ly/1GeQuRG>; "Tinder-like': two expats launch new app for meeting people in the UAE," *Albawaba Business*, April 3, 2015, <http://bit.ly/19Sp3hs>.

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Jeltee, was launched by two Armenian expats and marketed as an app for forming friendships and connections rather than casual dating.<sup>44</sup>

The Lebanese queer and feminist e-magazine *Bekhsoos*<sup>45</sup> and the U.S.-based Arab Lesbian e-magazine *Bin El Nas* are both blocked.<sup>46</sup> Many websites displaying religious content are blocked, including an Arab-Christian online forum named The Church Network.<sup>47</sup> A number of secular and atheist websites and forums in Arabic continue to be blocked such as 3almani.org, secularkuwait.freeforums.org, nadyelfikr.net, alawan.org, ladeenyon.net, and ladeeni.net.<sup>48</sup>

With the Emirates' support for the military coup in Egypt, the website Cairo Portal reported being blocked in the UAE, alongside other unnamed Egyptian websites, following their critical reports of the Gulf country's political stand.<sup>49</sup> Authorities continue to ban inactive sites such as the political forum UAE Hewar and the blogs Secret Dubai Diary<sup>50</sup> and UAE Torture.<sup>51</sup> The latter had posted a torture video taken in 2004 in which a member of the ruling family was shown to have tortured an Afghan man. The suspect was acquitted in 2010 in a case that was widely believed to be a show trial.<sup>52</sup> A request to unblock UAE Hewar was rejected by the Federal Supreme Court in July 2012,<sup>53</sup> and its Facebook page is also blocked due to its criticism of the regime and state corruption.<sup>54</sup>

As part of a verdict in which five users were sentenced to 7 to 15 years on charges of violating the constitution and cooperating with foreign political organizations (see "Prosecutions and Detentions"), a court also ordered the blocking of five websites that were already inaccessible in the country. These included the Emirates Media and Studies Center (EMASC); the Seven Emirates, which focuses on the seven activists who had their citizenship revoked for their political activities; the *Watan* news website; the Islah political group website; and the Yanabeea.net educational network.<sup>55</sup>

Over the past five years, political content has been the focus of state censorship. Examples include the secular pan-Arab online forum "Modern Discussion,"<sup>56</sup> and the California-based Arabic online newspaper *Watan*, all blocked in September 2012.<sup>57</sup> A website disseminating news of the trial of 94 Emirati political detainees was also blocked in 2013.<sup>58</sup> The anonymous website UAE University Watch<sup>59</sup> and UAE Prison, which exposes violations against jailed expatriates, have both been

44 "'Tinder-like': two expats launch new app for meeting people in the UAE."

45 *Bekhsoos Magazine*, <http://www.bekhsoos.com/>.

46 *Bin El Nas Magazine*, <http://www.bintelnas.org>.

47 Arab Church, <http://www.arabchurch.com/>.

48 "Help us document blocked Internet Sites in UAE," <http://bit.ly/1e00dxW>.

49 "The UAE Blocks Cairo Portal and Other Egyptian Websites," [in Arabic] *Cairo Portal*, February 20, 2014, <http://bit.ly/1GeRtSb>.

50 *Secret Dubai diary* (blog), <http://secretdubai.blogspot.com/>.

51 OpenNet Initiative, "Uniated Arab Emirates," August 7, 2009, <https://opennet.net/research/profiles/united-arab-emirates>.

52 Robert Mackey, "Abu Dhabi Royal Acquitted in Torture Trial," *The Lede* (blog), *New York Times*, January 11, 2010, <http://nyti.ms/1ZFP1e1>.

53 Human Rights Watch, "UAE: Investigate Threats against 'UAE 5,'" November 25, 2011, <http://bit.ly/1RcVXsR>; Human Rights Watch, "UAE: Trial of Activists 'Fundamentally Unfair,'" October 2, 2011, <http://bit.ly/1GzEWw>.

54 Reporters Without Borders, "Countries Under Surveillance: United Arab Emirates," March 11, 2011, <http://bit.ly/1k7ek8a>.

55 "68 members of Islah jailed for terrorism," [in Arabic] *AlShahed Newspaper*, July 3, 2013, <http://bit.ly/1LQ3lff>.

56 Modern Discussion, <http://www.ahewar.org/>.

57 Arab Network for Human Rights Information (ANHRI), "News website blocked," IFEX, March 23, 2012, <http://bit.ly/1Lmojxh>.

58 ANHRI, Facebook Post, April 18, 2013, <https://www.facebook.com/AnhriHr/posts/506587829404624>.

59 UAE University Watch, <http://www.uaeuniversitywatch.net/>.

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blocked.<sup>60</sup> Emaraty Bedoon, the blog of the stateless individual Ahmed Abdulkhaleq who was deported to Thailand in July 2012 for his political activism, is also blocked.<sup>61</sup>

Pages of political significance, such as the Arab-American news website *Arab Times*, the blog of an atheist Emirati man Ben Kerishan, and the anonymous Secret Dubai blog, continue to be blocked. In January 2014 alone, Twitter users have reported the blocking of ProxTube which unblocks censored YouTube content,<sup>62</sup> the chatting website Omelga, and the image-based social network We Heart It.<sup>63</sup>

The availability of Voice-over-Internet-Protocol (VoIP) services in the UAE is shrouded in doubt and complicated by disputes between the country's two telecommunications companies, Etisalat and du, and the TRA. In the past, many aspects of VoIP applications were blocked by both providers, and Skype was classified by the TRA as an "unlicensed VoIP." When users landed on the Skype website, a notice appeared stating, "Access to this site is currently blocked. The site falls under the Prohibited Content Categories of the UAE's Internet Access Management Policy."<sup>64</sup> In March 2015, providers blocked the Whatsapp voice calls feature a few hours after it was introduced.<sup>65</sup> Two months later, Facebook's video-calling feature was blocked as well.<sup>66</sup> In April 2014, Etisalat's Twitter account stated that Skype can only be used over Wi-Fi.<sup>67</sup>

Similar products such as Viber or Apple's Facetime have been banned since 2013;<sup>68</sup> in fact, Apple agreed to sell its iPhone4 products to UAE mobile phone companies without the Facetime application preinstalled.<sup>69</sup> Users in the UAE reported that Viber only works over Wi-Fi and Apple's Facetime video-calling feature can only be used if the iPhone was purchased outside the country. However, on numerous occasions the TRA has emphasized that it is up to the mobile phone providers to license these products. In September 2014, the TRA clarified that the use of Viber and Skype in the country is still not permitted.<sup>70</sup> Initial reports from the TRA indicated that Skype users could face fines of AED 1 million (US\$272,000) or two years imprisonment, but the regulatory body denied that it had made these statements and reiterated that Skype was still an "unauthorized service."<sup>71</sup>

Etisalat and du currently offer their own prepaid VoIP cards, although their prices are higher than those listed by Skype. In January 2014, the VoIP service "Vippie by Voipswitch" tweeted that they were blocked in the Emirates.<sup>72</sup> Despite these limitations, circumvention software and proxies are commonly used by Emiratis to access blocked content<sup>73</sup> and VoIP services.<sup>74</sup> However, the Dubai Po-

60 <http://uaeprison.com>.

61 *Emaraty Bedoon* (blog), <http://www.emaratybedoon.blogspot.com/>.

62 Dr. Cool, Twitter Post, January 11, 2014, 10:12 PM, <http://bit.ly/1RK8nJx>.

63 Romina Chiara Torres, Twitter Post, January 14, 2014, 12:29 AM, <http://bit.ly/1Lc8B9X>.

64 Kyle Sinclair, "Mobile subscribers in UAE get access to Skype calls, but for how long," *The National*, March 20, 2013, <http://bit.ly/1Nerx8U>.

65 Vicky Kapur, "Still can't get free WhatsApp voice calls in UAE? This is why," *Emirates 24/7*, March 17, 2015, <http://bit.ly/1VU9hUw>.

66 Joseph George, "Facebook Messenger video calls blocked in UAE?" *Emirates 24/7*, May 21, 2015, <http://bit.ly/1KbtMVG>.

67 Etisalat Care, Twitter Post, April 21, 2014, 11:58 PM, <http://bit.ly/1LmpBjK>.

68 Dow Jones, "Viber seeks to circumvent ban in Middle East," *The National*, June 10, 2013, <http://bit.ly/1LQ4unr>.

69 Reporters Without Borders, "Countries Under Surveillance: United Arab Emirates."

70 Aarti Nagraj, "VoIP Services Such As Skype, Viber Illegal In UAE, Clarifies Regulator," *Gulf Business*, September 3, 2014, <http://bit.ly/1hGvp7i>.

71 Colin Simpson, "UAE Skype users will not face jail or Dh1 million fine, confirms telecom regulator," *The National*, May 12, 2013, <http://bit.ly/1OxlTlt>.

72 Vippie by Voipswitch, Twitter Post, January 14, 2014, 3:46 AM, <http://bit.ly/1NJpZH4>.

73 Stuart Turton, "Dubai's dubious internet 'censorship'," *alprh*, September 6, 2010, <http://bit.ly/1Pjil6g>.

74 Triska Hamid, "Telecoms revenues threatened by Skype," *The National*, April 10, 2013, <http://bit.ly/1G7E1Qj>.

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lice declared the use of Virtual Private Networks (VPN) “illegal and punishable under the UAE law” in March 2015.<sup>75</sup>

BlackBerry services have been restricted since 2010, when the government introduced a regulation allowing only companies with more than 20 BlackBerry accounts to access the encrypted BlackBerry Messenger service.<sup>76</sup> Two weeks after launching BlackBerry’s BBM channels social media service in November 2013, the country’s two companies stopped the service in response to guidelines from the Telecommunications Regulatory Authority.<sup>77</sup>

According to a report from Citizen Lab in January 2013, ISPs in the UAE have used tools such as SmartFilter and NetSweeper to censor content. Citizen Lab also found five installations of Blue Coat ProxySG in the country’s network linked to Etisalat.<sup>78</sup> Another report from CitizenLab in November 2013 listed websites that are blocked in the UAE because both SmartFilter (used by Etisalat) and NetSweeper (used by du) have miscategorized them as nudity or pornographic content.<sup>79</sup> Although YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, and international blog-hosting services are freely available, controversial terms are often filtered from search results within these sites.

## Content Removal

The removal of online content often lacks procedural transparency or judicial oversight. Under the 2012 cybercrime law, website owners and employees “may be held liable” for any violations occurring on their sites, including defamation charges.<sup>80</sup>

According to the Google Transparency Report for January to June 2014, the UAE authorities made two requests to remove Google+ posts that violated the 2012 cybercrime law. The posts were removed locally because they “contained obscene language and political satire against members of the ruling family of the UAE.”<sup>81</sup> The report indicated that Google removed 85 percent of the 13 requests that were received in June 2014. Only two of those requests were court orders, according to the breakdown of data provided by Google.<sup>82</sup>

The Twitter Transparency Report indicated that no removal requests were made during the 2015 reporting period. However, one removal request was made during the January to June 2014 period specifying the removal of 13 accounts without a court order.<sup>83</sup> In May 2012, Dubai police succeeded in shutting down 15 accounts on Facebook and Twitter for “defamation and abuse” by sending letters to both companies outlining the offenses committed under the UAE law.<sup>84</sup>

75 Joseph George, “VPN use punishable under law: Dubai Police,” *Emirates* 24/7, March 12, 2015, <http://bit.ly/1xeVgVI>.

76 Reporters Without Borders, “Use of Most Secure BlackBerry System Restricted, Blogger Arrested,” April 28, 2011, <http://bit.ly/1X6xNUG>.

77 “BlackBerry blow: Etisalat and du pull plug on new BBM services in UAE,” *The National*, December 10, 2013, <http://bit.ly/1RcNJB3>.

78 Greg Wiseman et. al., “Appendix A: Summary Analysis of Blue Coat ‘Countries of Interest,’” CitizenLab, January 15, 2013, <http://bit.ly/1ZFRSna>.

79 Bennett Haselton, “Smartfilter: Miscategorization and Filtering in Saudi Arabia and UAE,” CitizenLab, November 28, 2013, <http://bit.ly/1P1PLas>.

80 Awad Mustafa, “Cyber-crime law to fight internet abuse and protect privacy in the UAE,” *The National*, November 13, 2012, <http://bit.ly/1VUaATH>.

81 Google, “United Arab Emirates,” in *Transparency Report*, January-June 2014, <http://bit.ly/1OEYHQE>.

82 Google, “Download the Data,” in *Transparency Report*, June 2014, <http://bit.ly/1KbuCln>.

83 Twitter, “United Arab Emirates,” in *Transparency Report*, <http://bit.ly/1ME83Mx>.

84 Sara Gates, “Dubai Police Shut Down 15 Facebook and Twitter Accounts Involved in Defamation And Abuse,” *Huffington Post*, May 21, 2012, <http://huff.to/1X6yY6H>.

## Media, Diversity, and Content Manipulation

Local news websites, many of which are owned by the state, employ a large degree of self-censorship in accordance with government regulations and unofficial “red lines.” *Gulf News*, *The National*, and *Emirates 24/7* are among the different online media outlets facing restrictions. The overall press freedom environment in traditional media is dire, with foreign journalists and academics often denied entry or deported for expressing their views on political topics.<sup>85</sup>

Nonetheless, since the regional uprisings of 2011, Emiratis have begun to tackle sensitive issues more boldly over the internet, particularly on social media. Users express their opinions, share information on arrests and trials, and even attempt to organize protests. However, most users remain anonymous when criticizing state officials or religion out of fear of legal action or harassment. While there is no available evidence to prove the government’s involvement in hiring public relations firms or bloggers to spread propaganda, a large number of anonymous Twitter users appear dedicated to harassing and intimidating political dissidents and their families online.

In addition to the threat of harassment and prosecution, 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.<sup>86</sup> Nonetheless, users have access to a variety of local and international news outlets, even if there are disparate reports of the blocking of specific UAE-related articles from these sites.<sup>87</sup>

## Digital Activism

Some Emiratis have continued to push back against government repression and intimidation by channeling their strong digital literacy into online activism, writing blogs, and calling for political reform on social networks. In the face of prosecution, activists still use online tools to highlight human rights violations and pass on messages from relatives in prison. Families of political prisoners still rely on Twitter to speak on behalf of detainees, explaining their cases, spreading information about violations of their rights, and calling for their release. There are several examples of relatives who are active online, including Mariam al-Mansouri,<sup>88</sup> the wife of detained blogger Rashid al-Shamsi, and Aysha al-Thufiri, the daughter of detainee Salih al-Thufiri.<sup>89</sup> Nonetheless, the online environment in the UAE is not free, and users face many challenges to freedom of expression online. For instance, three sisters were secretly detained for three months for tweets calling for the release of their detained brother Issa al-Suwaidi.<sup>90</sup>

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85 See for example, “Egyptian journalist freed from UAE detention,” *Aljazeera*, August 4, 2013, <http://bit.ly/1PjjQ4o>; “Palestinian journalist detained at a secret prison in the UAE,” *Middle East Monitor*, December 4, 2013, <http://bit.ly/1QwYIL7>; Hrag Vartanian, “Artist Walid Raad Denied Entry into UAE, Becoming Third Gulf Labor Member Turned Away,” *Hyperallergic*, May 14, 2015, <http://bit.ly/1ME91Z3>, and Migrant-Rights, “UAE Censors Author of Book Criticizing Migrant, Race Issues,” June 17, 2014, <http://bit.ly/1Oxn2JH>.

86 ANHRI. “UAE Continues its Serious Violations Against the Freedom of Opinion and Expression due to Blocking “Watan” Website,” September 24, 2012, <http://bit.ly/1GlvCH8>.

87 ECHRights, Twitter Post, July 31, 2012, 9:10 AM, <http://bit.ly/1RKb5Pf>.

88 Marian Mansori, Twitter Account, <https://twitter.com/MariamMansori>.

89 Aysha\_75, Twitter Account, [https://twitter.com/Aysha\\_75](https://twitter.com/Aysha_75).

90 Amnesty International, “UAE: Three sisters released after three months in secret detention for tweeting,” May 15, 2015, <http://bit.ly/1PvghYe>.

## Violations of User Rights

*The rights of online users in the UAE are not protected by law, nor are they respected in practice. Several laws, including the penal code, the publishing law, and the cybercrime law, are commonly exploited to deter free expression and violate the rights of users. There is a general feeling among those who reside in the UAE that online tools are monitored and that surveillance is widely practiced with little judicial oversight. Several prominent online activists and ordinary citizens were detained in late 2012 and early 2013 as part of the UAE 94 trials. In addition, 2014 and 2015 saw a number of cases of arrest, torture, and long prison sentences.*

### Legal Environment

Article 30 of the UAE constitution states that “Freedom of opinion and expressing it verbally, in writing or by other means of expression shall be guaranteed within the limits of law.”<sup>91</sup> However, the judicial system in the Emirates lacks independence, and prosecutions are often pursued for political reasons.<sup>92</sup> Since the 2011 Arab Arising, the Gulf region made a collective effort to pass legislation that criminalizes criticism.<sup>93</sup> As a result of this, the internet is heavily regulated in an attempt to quell legitimate free expression.

In August 2014, President Sheikh Khalifa bin Zayed al-Nahayan approved tougher antiterrorism measures. The passage of Terrorism Law No. 7 allows for severe punishments such as life imprisonment, death, and fines up to AED 100 million (US\$27 million) if convicted as a terrorist.<sup>94</sup> 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.”<sup>95</sup> The law had a chilling effect on free speech and paves the way for nonviolent opposition activists to be targeted for their views.

In a new decision by the country’s Federal Supreme Court issued in June 2015, insulting others via WhatsApp messages will be punished with an AED 250,000 (US\$68,000) fine and jail time, with deportation for foreign violators.<sup>96</sup>

The cybercrime law issued in November 2012 continues to be used to prosecute online users that are critical of the government.<sup>97</sup> While the introduction of the law was fundamental in providing a sounder legal basis to combat online fraud, money laundering, hacking, and other serious cybercrimes, the law also criminalizes a wide range of online activity commonly accepted within international norms. For example, hefty fines and jail sentences await users who engage in online gambling, disseminate pornographic material, or violate another person’s privacy through posting their photograph or making statements about them online, regardless of the accuracy of the accusations. Intermediaries, such as domain hosts or administrators, are also liable if their websites are used to “prompt riot, hatred, racism, sectarianism, or damage the national unity or social peace or prejudice

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91 “Constitution of the United Arab Emirates,” Refworld, accessed August 1, 2013, <http://bit.ly/1k7kUvC>.

92 Human Rights Watch, “UAE: Investigate Threats against ‘UAE 5,’” November 25, 2011, <http://bit.ly/1ZFUdyh>.

93 Human Rights Watch, “GCC/US: Obama Should Press Gulf Rulers,” May 12, 2015, <http://bit.ly/1IO8K2l>.

94 AFP, “UAE toughens anti-terrorism laws,” *Al Arabiya*, August 21 2014, <http://ara.tv/j8cc4>.

95 Human Rights Watch, “UAE: Terrorism Law Threatens Lives, Liberty,” December 3, 2014, <http://bit.ly/1NdV6st>.

96 “New UAE Online Law: Dh250,000 fine for swearing on WhatsApp,” *Emirates* 24/7, June 16, 2015, <http://bit.ly/1MHqplv>.

97 Human Rights Watch, *World Report 2015: United Arab Emirates*, <http://bit.ly/1IOyERp>.

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the public order and public morals.<sup>98</sup> The cybercrime law also contains punishments for offending the state, its rulers, and its symbols, or for insulting Islam and other religions. 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.<sup>99</sup>

Articles 8 and 176 of the penal code are used to punish public "insults" of the country's top officials, although these articles are also widely used to prosecute any users that express a desire for political reform.<sup>100</sup> Articles 70 and 71 of the 1980 publishing law prohibit criticism of the head of the state and of Islam or any other religion.<sup>101</sup> Defamation laws have been criticized by lawyers as "all-encompassing" and clouded with many grey areas. The burden of proof is also upon the defendant. Penalties can be as high as two years imprisonment or a fine of AED 20,000 (US\$5,444).<sup>102</sup>

## Prosecutions and Detentions for Online Activities

Since the sentencing of the 69 political dissents in 2013, the UAE continues to arbitrarily detain bloggers, netizens, and internet users. Human rights groups have continuously criticized the UAE for violating the human rights of political detainees and failing to provide them with fair and transparent trials. Instead, many are denied access to a lawyer, held without cause for extended periods of time, or tortured.<sup>103</sup>

Numerous Emirati users continue to serve long prison sentences for their online activities, mainly related to the UAE94 trials directed mainly against alleged members of the banned opposition movement al-Islah.<sup>104</sup> Blogger Khalifa Al-Nuaimi<sup>105</sup> and Twitter users Rashid al-Shamsi<sup>106</sup> and Musabeh al-Rumaithy<sup>107</sup> were arrested for their online activities and sentenced to 10 years imprisonment in July 2013. Blogger Abdullah al-Hajri<sup>108</sup> and Twitter user Omran al-Radhwan<sup>109</sup> are serving seven-year sentences.<sup>110</sup>

Several Emiratis were sentenced to prison for criticizing state institutions, particularly over their criticisms of the UAE94 trials.

- In November 2014, online activist Osama Al-Najjar was sentenced to three years in prison

98 See Federal Decree-Law no. (5) of 2012 on Combating Cybercrimes, August 13, 2012, <http://bit.ly/1gDnVCj>.

99 "New UAE cyber crime laws: Jail for indecent posts," *Emirates* 24/7, November 14, 2012, <http://bit.ly/1EPrBtK>.

100 Human Rights Watch, "UAE: Free Speech Under Attack," January 25, 2012, <http://bit.ly/1k7mjSL>.

101 [Federal Law No. 15 of 1980 Governing Publications and Publishing](http://www.federal.ae/legislation/federal-law-no-15-of-1980-governing-publications-and-publishing), <http://bit.ly/1VUyHGE>.

102 Kevin Brass, "Defamation laws keep the aggrieved quiet," *The National*, November 8, 2011, <http://bit.ly/1LvihsZ>.

103 Rori Donaghy, "Torture in the United Arab Emirates," *Huffington Post*, September 24, 2012, <http://huff.to/1OxobAU>.

104 Emirates Centre for Human Rights (ECHR), "Current political prisoners," accessed March 18, 2014, [http://www.echr.org.uk/?page\\_id=207](http://www.echr.org.uk/?page_id=207).

105 Al-Nuaimi had previously written about "the UAE 5" and had been consistently threatened prior to his arrest: "درغم لآ ( حبصموب ) حبصموب !! حوي 35 لبق ديظن تلآ نع فشكي .." *Kalnuaimi* (blog), July 15, 2012, <http://bit.ly/1jqEuCW>.

106 Al-Shamsi had tweeted news of arrests and written blog posts related to politics and free speech See *Rashed Al Shamsi* (blog), <http://bit.ly/1hGA88O>.

107 al-Rumaithy was arrested for his online writings in which he expressed support for the Islamist Islah party. He had been handed a travel ban one month before his arrest. See GC4HR, "UAE- Travel bans imposed against human rights activists as restriction on freedom of movement increases," July 1, 2012, <http://www.gc4hr.org/news/view/187>.

108 Al-Hajri was arrested over the contents of his blog, <http://alhajria.wordpress.com>, in which he called for more government action to combat public immorality.

109 Al-Radhwan had tweeted about "the UAE 5" detainees and wrote several posts on his website, <http://omran83.tumblr.com>, promoting Islah and criticizing state violations of Shariah law.

110 Amnesty International, "UAE: Grossly unfair trial of government critics," July 2, 2013, <http://bit.ly/1X6DVMP>.

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and fined US\$136,000 for tweets alleging that his father, who was imprisoned as part of the UAE94 trials, was tortured by security forces.<sup>111</sup> Osama Al-Najjar had been arrested in March 2014 and was detained without trial until September 2014, after the passage of the new antiterrorism law. He was found guilty of belonging to banned political group al-Islah, spreading lies, and instigating hatred against the state through Twitter.<sup>112</sup>

- Similarly, in June 2015, Nasser al-Faresi was sentenced to three years in jail for a tweet insulting the Federal Supreme Court and the ruler of Abu Dhabi. The court charged him with “spreading rumors and information that harmed the country.”<sup>113</sup>

This continues a trend from last year:

- Mohammed Salem al-Zumer is currently serving a three-year sentence since December 2013 for his posts on Twitter and YouTube regarding the UAE94 trials.<sup>114</sup>
- Abdulrahman Bajubair was sentenced to five years in jail for running a blog and Twitter accounts reporting on the mistreatment of political detainees in December 2013.<sup>115</sup>
- In March 2014, Khalifa Rabeiah and Othman al-Shehhi were fined and are currently serving a five-year sentence for tweets critical of the judiciary system.<sup>116</sup>

Several noncitizens were arrested for social media posts under the country’s harsh cybercrime laws:

- In April 2014, authorities arrested and deported Palestinian refugee and human rights advocate Iyad el-Baghdadi to Malaysia because of his Twitter activism.<sup>117</sup> Details of el-Baghdadi’s ordeal only surfaced in October 2014, when he was finally able to leave Malaysia for Norway to attend an event and apply for political asylum.<sup>118</sup>
- In February 2015, Ryan Pate, an American contractor in the UAE was arrested upon arrival for a Facebook post insulting the country and his employers.<sup>119</sup>
- In July 2015, Jodi Magi, an Australian national was deported from the UAE after posting a picture to Facebook showing a vehicle blocking disabled car spaces.<sup>120</sup> Magi was arrested in March 2015 and released on bail before being convicted under the cybercrime law.<sup>121</sup>

Other cases from the coverage period include:

111 GC4HR, *Hear their Voices: Alarming Times for Human Rights Defenders in the Gulf Region & Neighboring Countries*, February 2015, <http://bit.ly/1GIwKkA>.

112 Gulf Center for Human Rights, *Torture and Abuse in Prisons in the United Arab Emirates*, March 5, 2015, <http://bit.ly/1OF61f5>; Human Rights Watch, “UAE: Terrorism Law Threatens Lives, Liberty,” December 3, 2014, <http://bit.ly/1NdV6st>.

113 Reuters, “UAE man jailed for tweets critical of high court: newspaper,” *Yahoo! News*, June 30, 2015, <http://yhoo.it/1VUf0cJ>.

114 Freedom House, *Freedom on the Net: UAE 2014*, <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2014/ united-arab-emirates>.

115 Reporters Without Borders, “United Arab Emirates: Tracking “cyber-criminals”,” March 11, 2014, <http://bit.ly/1OF6kXh>.

116 “Digital Citizen 1.5,” *Global Voices*, April 1, 2014, <https://advocacy.globalvoicesonline.org/2014/04/01/digital-citizen-1-5/>.

117 Migrant-Rights, “Inside Emirati Deportation Prisons,” February 17, 2015, <http://bit.ly/1G677dk>.

118 Murtaza Hussain, “How the UAE tried to silence a popular Arab Spring activist,” *The Intercept*, October 21, 2014, <http://bit.ly/1LQb4uo>.

119 Stephanie Gallman, “Florida man arrested in UAE for Facebook post: I’m sorry,” *CNN*, March 5, 2015, <http://cnn.it/1w85KuT>.

120 “Australian woman deported from UAE after Facebook post,” *Aljazeera*, July 15, 2015, <http://bit.ly/1M5Y9Ck>.

121 Haneen Dajani, “Tough UAE social media law could see expats deported for saving someone’s photo,” *The National*, July 19, 2015, <http://bit.ly/1L9kTT1>.

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- In March 2015, an Emirati man and woman were arrested after a pornographic video of them circulated online. Dubai court sentenced them both to one year in jail, while a third defendant was charged with an unspecified sentence for circulating the material.<sup>122</sup>
- In October 2014, a man was fined AED 10,000 (US\$2,700) by Sharjah court for insulting a woman on a news website. The court's decision concludes that because the internet is available throughout the country, an online offense can be tried in any of the Emirates even though the website's company is based in Dubai.<sup>123</sup>
- In June 2015, the Federal Supreme Court used the 2012 cybercrime law to order the retrial of a man convicted of insulting his colleague via WhatsApp. The defendant might face a US\$68,000 fine as authorities warned of imprisonment and deportation if similar cases happen in future.<sup>124</sup> According to Dubai Police, in 2014, 212 cases of extortion and blackmail via social media had been reported compared to 80 in 2013.<sup>125</sup>

## Surveillance, Privacy, and Anonymity

The high amount of prosecutions and physical harassment of users in the UAE is, in part, due to the obstacles they face in using ICT tools anonymously. Mobile phone users re-registered their information as part of a 2012 TRA campaign "My Number, My Identity."<sup>126</sup> In January 2013, the country's two mobile phone providers issued a final warning to their users to register their SIM cards or have their lines cut for failing to comply.<sup>127</sup>

Cybercafe customers are also required to provide their ID and personal information in order to surf the net.<sup>128</sup> In April 2014, the Ministry of Interior announced plans to link ID cards with internet services and cellphones "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."<sup>129</sup> In March 2015, the TRA announced its establishment of an alert system that detects certain keywords relating to "nudity, sexual cyber-extortion and insulting members of the ruling families." Ghaith Al Mazaina, acting manager at the security quality service at the TRA, stated: "We have started monitoring all the social media channels – all websites and profiles are monitored." Another TRA official added: "We try

122 Salam Al Amir, "Pair sentenced in Dubai after their sex video circulates on the internet," *The National*, March 5, 2015, <http://bit.ly/1OF73rs>.

123 Haneen Dajani, "Online verbal insults are punishable in any emirate, UAE Supreme Court rules," *The National*, October 27, 2014, <http://bit.ly/1Pjpp2P>.

124 "UAE man faces \$68,000 fine for swearing on WhatsApp," BBC, June 16, 2015, <http://bbc.in/1d0syDV>.

125 "UAE in crackdown on social media abuse," *Arabian Business*, March 10, 2015, <http://bit.ly/1FKCiuW>.

126 The TRA's statement reads: "Your mobile phone number is an extension of your identity. Sharing or giving away your SIM-Card to others can cause unwanted consequences, including being held accountable for any improper conduct or misuse associated with the mobile phone subscription by the authorities as well as being liable for all charges by the licensees." Telecommunications Regulatory Authority, "My Number My Identity," accessed April 28, 2013, <http://bit.ly/1LPbs66>; and Nadeem Hanif, "Every mobile phone user in the UAE must re-register SIM card," *The National*, June 28, 2012, <http://bit.ly/1k7pFoY>.

127 Nadeem Hanif, "Du and Etisalat brace for UAE users last chance to re-register Sim card," *The National*, January 16, 2013, <http://bit.ly/1GeZoig>.

128 Morgan Marquis-Boire, et. al., *Planet Blue Coat: Mapping Global Censorship and Surveillance Tools*, Citizen Lab, January 15, 2013, <http://bit.ly/1d0bWVr>.

129 Caline Malek, "UAE ministry to link ID cards with the internet to crack down on child abusers," *The National*, April 5, 2014, <http://bit.ly/1LPc4J0>.

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to get the page or profile down or remove the violation as soon as possible and report the case to police if it is a criminal case.<sup>130</sup>

Internet and mobile providers are not transparent in discussing the procedures taken by authorities to access their data and users' information. Incidents of providers demanding warrants or legal permissions for security bodies to gain access to user data are not known. Warnings from both the Abu Dhabi and Dubai police against spreading rumors through mobile messages may indicate the government's overall surveillance on users.<sup>131</sup>

Twitter users have been arrested for exchanging private messages with controversial accounts.<sup>132</sup> For example, Saeed al-Shamsi was detained on December 14, 2012 over suspicions that he ran the anonymous Twitter account called "Sout al-Haq" (@weldbudhabi). The account was targeted over allegations that it received leaked documents from the Interior Ministry, although the documents were never published. After al-Shamsi's arrest, the Sout al-Haq account sent a tweet in which he claimed the authorities had arrested the wrong person. Al-Shamsi's lawyer said that his defendant appeared distressed and disoriented in court with signs of intimidation and torture.<sup>133</sup> He was reportedly released in March 2013. Two other users were also arrested for having messaged Sout al-Haq after authorities reportedly hacked into the account. Only days after, five more Twitter users were arrested for expressing political criticism and support for detainees.<sup>134</sup>

## Intimidation and Violence

Online activists in the UAE face arbitrary detention, travel restrictions, and potentially torture. In February 2015, Emirati authorities arrested Omani blogger Muawiyah Alrawahi as he was crossing into the country by car. The blogger has been critical of both Omani and UAE authorities online and remains in arbitrary detention as of July 2015.<sup>135</sup> Human rights defender Ahmed Mansoor has faced continual harassment by the authorities, and is subject to a travel ban.<sup>136</sup> Similarly, three sisters disappeared in February 2015 shortly after being questioned for posting tweets on behalf of their brother, Dr. Issa al-Suwaidi (part of the UAE 94), who is currently a prisoner of conscience.<sup>137</sup> Asma Khalifa al-Suwaidi, Mariam Khalifa al-Suwaidi, and Dr. Alyaziyah Khalifa al-Suwaidi were released three months later in May.<sup>138</sup>

## Technical Attacks

Emirati activists have reported spyware and malware attacks against their computers. In October

130 "UAE in crackdown on social media abuse," *Arabian Business*, March 10, 2015, <http://bit.ly/1FKCiuW>.

131 Abdulla Rasheed, "Misuse of instant messaging services punishable by law," *Gulf News*, July 26, 2011, <http://bit.ly/1G7JSEd>.

132 Bill Law, "Eight online activists 'arrested in UAE,'" December 19, 2012, <http://bbc.in/1X6HkLs>.

133 Donaghy, "Torture in the United Arab Emirates."

134 Law, "Eight online activists 'arrested in UAE:'"

135 GC4HR, "Oman / UAE: Mother of blogger Muawiya Al-Rawahi calls on authorities to provide medication for her son," June 25, 2015, <http://bit.ly/1Lcc15W>.

136 GC4HR, *Hear their Voices: Alarming Times for Human Rights Defenders in the Gulf Region & Neighboring Countries*.

137 Amnesty International, "Urgent Action: Sisters Subject to Enforced Disappearance," February 18, 2015, <http://bit.ly/1ATiqX0>; GC4HR, "UAE-Sisters of imprisoned UAE94 activist subjected to enforced disappearance as State Security Apparatus continues to violate human rights," February 20, 2015, <http://bit.ly/1MEhCLt>.

138 Amnesty International, "UAE: Three sisters released after three months in secret detention for tweeting," May 15, 2015, <http://bit.ly/1N7xd6P>.

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2014, the Twitter account of human rights defender Ahmed Mansoor was hacked, with some blaming state security.<sup>139</sup> In one case from January 2013, a user received an e-mail purportedly containing a link to a video of the Dubai police chief. Instead, the link contained spyware that could monitor the victim's screen, enable the computer's webcam, steal passwords, and conduct keylogging. It was believed the Emirati government was behind the attack.<sup>140</sup>

The UAE remains one of the top countries facing hacking attempts worldwide. According to a study by Kaspersky Lab, the UAE is the second most attacked country online in the Middle East and the 15th most attacked worldwide.<sup>141</sup> The country's spam rate was recorded at 73 percent, and 46 percent of the country's social networking users fell victim to cybercrimes, compared to the global average of 39 percent.<sup>142</sup> Kaspersky Lab has also reported that 51 per cent of users in the UAE faced financial cyber-attacks during 2014, with 10 per cent of respondents reportedly losing money as a result.<sup>143</sup>

In August 2014, the Dubai Financial Services Authority said it has issued nine alerts warning firms about the scams, which use the internet to impersonate genuine investment companies and individuals, adding that such abuse is on the rise.<sup>144</sup> In January 2015, Abu Dhabi Police warned against scam bank reports received by email, claiming suspicious money transfers to users' bank accounts.<sup>145</sup> In July 2015, the technology company Symantec was able to uncover a new corporate espionage group that has compromised a string of major corporations in recent years, including three organizations located or headquartered in the UAE.<sup>146</sup>

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139 GC4HR, *Hear their Voices: Alarming Times for Human Rights Defenders in the Gulf Region & Neighboring Countries*.

140 Bill Marczak, "Hacked Website, Java Vulnerability Used to Target UAE Activist with Spyware," Bahrain Watch (blog), January 15, 2013, <http://bit.ly/1LmxeP6>.

141 Helen Gaskell, "UAE is top-two victim of regional cyber attacks," *Arabian Business*, March 22, 2015, <http://bit.ly/1EJaRC1>.

142 "UAE to Face Advanced Cybercrime in 2013," *Arabian Gazette*, December 9, 2012, <http://bit.ly/1OFb0MV>.

143 "51% of UAE users faced financial cyber-attacks in 2014," *Emirates 24/7*, December 27, 2014, <http://bit.ly/1GIywlI>.

144 Frank Kane, "Fraud alerts sounded by DFSA with scams on the rise in UAE," *The National*, August 18, 2014, <http://bit.ly/1pU8mG0>.

145 "Bank scam calls UAE residents in for questioning," *Emirates 24/7*, January 31, 2015, <http://bit.ly/1LvLYyI>.

146 Stephen McBride, "Three UAE firms targeted by 'sophisticated' cyber-bandits," *Arabian Business*, July 12, 2015, <http://bit.ly/1LQge9G>.