

# United Arab Emirates

Not Free

28

100

A [Obstacles to Access](#) 12 25

B [Limits on Content](#) 10 35

C [Violations of User Rights](#) 6 40

Last Year's Score & Status

31 100 Not Free



## Overview

Internet freedom remained significantly restricted in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) during the coverage period, characterized by high levels of online censorship, onerous regulatory constraints, heavy criminal penalties for online speech, and pervasive surveillance.

The UAE is a federation of seven emirates led in practice by Abu Dhabi, the largest by area and richest in natural resources. Limited elections are held for a federal advisory body, but political parties are banned, and all executive, legislative, and

judicial authority ultimately rests with the seven hereditary rulers. The civil liberties of both citizens and noncitizens, who make up an overwhelming majority of the population, are subject to significant restrictions.

## Key Developments

### June 1, 2018 - May 31, 2019

- New revelations about the government’s surveillance activities emerged in a January 2019 investigation of the hacking program “Project Raven,” for which US intelligence experts were recruited to surveil dissidents, political opponents, activists, and journalists. Leaked documents from August 2018 revealed the government’s use of the Israeli technology company NSO Group’s spyware on similar targets ([see C5](#)).
- Users continued to face arrest and prosecution in retaliation for their online activities, including a man arrested in Dubai in May 2019 for filming and posting a viral video of a dispute between a hotel worker and a woman; and a British woman arrested in April 2019 at an airport in Dubai for insulting Facebook comments she posted about her ex-husband’s new wife ([see C3](#)).
- The government continued to block websites that ran afoul of its restrictive censorship regime throughout the coverage period, including blogs and news sites that criticized the government, the websites of human rights organizations, LGBT+ material, and pornography ([see B1](#)).
- In August 2018, the president amended three articles in the cybercrime law, including harsher penalties for enabling communication between terrorist groups or any other “unauthorized group” ([see C2](#)).

## A Obstacles to Access

*Emirati users enjoy a robust information and communications technology (ICT) infrastructure and high connection speeds. However, the major telecommunications companies are either fully or partially state-owned, resulting in high prices and weak competition. Popular Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP) services are subject*

to blocking.

A1 0-6 pts

Do infrastructural limitations restrict access to the internet or the speed and quality of internet connections?

66

The UAE is one of the world's most connected countries. According to the International Telecommunication Union (ITU), 98.5 percent of the population used the internet in 2018, up from 94.8 percent the previous year.<sup>1</sup> As of November 2018, there were nearly 1.4 million internet subscribers in the country, 100 percent of whom had broadband connections.<sup>2</sup> The UAE has one of the highest mobile phone penetration rates in the region; the ITU reported 208.5 mobile subscriptions per 100 inhabitants in 2018.<sup>3</sup>

In March 2019, the mobile service provider Etisalat revealed full readiness of its 5G network, and 5G-enabled mobile phones were introduced in June 2019, after the coverage period.<sup>4</sup> The following month, the provider Du revealed that the second stage of its project to build a 5G network would begin by December 2020.<sup>5</sup> Previously, in March 2019, Du stated that the first live 5G data call had been made on its network, and that it was launching 700 5G sites throughout the country.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, Etisalat has increased its broadband speeds, offering up to 1 Gbps for certain home plans and speeds of up to 600 Mbps—up from 100 Mbps—for several business services.<sup>7</sup>

Damage to undersea cables occasionally disrupts connectivity,<sup>8</sup> though no incidents were reported during the coverage period. In December 2018, various telecommunications companies, including Etisalat, signed an agreement to create a new submarine cable system by 2021 linking South Africa, the Middle East, Pakistan, and Europe. One of the stations will be based in the emirate of Fujairah.<sup>9</sup>

In October 2018, *Gulf Business* reported that 10,800 taxis in Dubai would offer free Wi-Fi as part of a phased project that began with 500 Dubai airport taxis in 2016.<sup>10</sup> Authorities and local press continue to warn against using free public Wi-Fi networks due to privacy concerns.<sup>11</sup>

- 1. <https://www.itu.int/en/ITU-D/Statistics/Pages/stat/default.aspx>
- 2. Telecommunications Regulatory Authority, <https://www.tra.gov.ae/userfiles/assets/vD19Q9GZdnn.xlsx>
- 3. International Telecommunication Union, "Percentage of individuals using the

internet, Percentage of individuals with mobile-cellular subscriptions,” 2018, <https://www.itu.int/en/ITU-D/Statistics/Pages/stat/default.aspx>

- 4. “Etisalat sees June arrival for 5G devices in the UAE,” 29 March, 2019. <https://www.arabianbusiness.com/technology/416644-etisalat-sees-june-ar...>; <https://gulfnews.com/technology/huawei-launches-the-king-of-5g-smartpho...>; [https://www.zawya.com/mena/en/press-releases/story/5G handsets will be ...](https://www.zawya.com/mena/en/press-releases/story/5G_handsets_will_be_...)
- 5. <https://www.telecompaper.com/news/du-to-launch-second-phase-of-5g-in-ua...>
- 6. “Dubai's du conducts first live 5G data call,” 02 March, 2019. <https://www.commsmea.com/business/19004-dubais-du-conducts-first-live-5...>
- 7. “UAE’s Etisalat doubles broadband speeds for free,” 28 Jan 2019. <https://www.tahawultech.com/industry/technology/uaes-etisalat-doubles-b...>
- 8. “Du says may take longer to repair damaged submarine cable,” Emirates 24/7, January 26, 2016, <http://www.emirates247.com/business/technology/du-says-may-take-longer-...>; “Du network interrupted for several hours,” Gulf News, May 26, 2017, <http://gulfnews.com/business/sectors/telecoms/du-network-interrupted-fo.....>
- 9. “Africa-1 subsea cable system coming closer to reality,” 27 Dec 2018. <https://www.commsmea.com/services/18740-africa-1-subsea-cable-system-co...>
- 10. Gulf Business, “Dubai to provide free wifi onboard all its 10,800 taxis,” October 17, 2018, <https://gulfbusiness.com/dubai-provide-free-wifi-onboard-10800-taxis/>
- 11. Khaleej Times, “Use free WiFi in the UAE? Here's a warning,” September 20, 2018, <https://www.khaleejtimes.com/technology/use-free-wifi-in-the-uae-heres-...>

A2 0-3 pts

Is access to the internet prohibitively expensive or beyond the reach of certain segments of the population for geographical, social, or other reasons?

13

While prices are among the highest in the region, broadband is affordable for most users given the country’s high per capita income.<sup>1</sup> A November 2018 survey by the UK telecommunications company Cable found that the average cost of broadband in the UAE is \$10.23 for 1 GB, nearly 20 percent more than the global average of \$8.53.<sup>2</sup> An Etisalat postpaid mobile plan with a 6 GB data allowance and 500 local minutes<sup>3</sup> costs 150 dirhams (\$40), as does a prepaid plan with an allowance of 3

GB plus 2 GB for over-the-top (OTT) services.<sup>4</sup> In 2017, the telecommunications regulator directed mobile service providers to reduce rates for UAE residents roaming within the Gulf region, resulting in an average 18 percent drop in prices for consumers.<sup>5</sup> Later that year, Etisalat announced a 5 percent valued-added tax (VAT) on all products and services beginning in January 2018.<sup>6</sup> In March 2019, based on input from consumers, the Telecommunications Regulatory Authority (TRA) lowered the cost of cancelling a mobile contract to one month's rental fee; the previous cost was one month multiplied by the number of months left over.<sup>7</sup>

Emirati schools are increasingly connected to the internet and equipped with e-learning facilities, and many offer tablets for student use.<sup>8</sup> There are also programs for principals to enroll in international computer literacy training programs.<sup>9</sup> In October 2018, the government launched Madrasa, a free digital platform estimated to provide 50 million primary and secondary school students in the region with 5,000 instructional videos, all translated into Arabic, on topics including science and mathematics.<sup>10</sup>

- <sup>1.</sup> International Telecommunications Union, Measuring the Information Society Report 2018, <https://www.itu.int/en/ITU-D/Statistics/Documents/publications/misr2018...>
- <sup>2.</sup> "UAE mobile data costs 20% more than global average," 5 March 2019. <https://www.arabianindustry.com/technology/news/2019/mar/5/uae-mobile-d...>
- <sup>3.</sup> Etisalat, New Post-paid plan <https://www.etisalat.ae/en/consumer/mobile/mobile-plans/postpaid-plans/...>
- <sup>4.</sup> Etisalat, Prepaid Data Plans <https://www.etisalat.ae/en/consumer/mobile/mobile-plans/data-plans/prep...>
- <sup>5.</sup> "TRA directs mobile operators in UAE to reduce GCC roaming rates," April 25, 2017. <http://www.emirates247.com/news/emirates/tra-directs-mobile-operators-i...>
- <sup>6.</sup> "Etisalat announces 5% VAT on products, services," Jan 21, 2017, <http://gulfnews.com/business/sectors/telecoms/etisalat-announces-5-vat-...>
- <sup>7.</sup> Gulf News, "TRA announces new rules for UAE phone users: Now closing a phone plan or contract early is cheaper," 20 March 2019. <https://gulfnews.com/uae/government/tra-announces-new-rules-for-uae-pho...>
- <sup>8.</sup> "UAE classrooms go from chalk board to smart board," Khaleej Times, February 22, 2016, <http://www.khaleejtimes.com/nation/education/from-chalk-board-to-smart-...>; "Now, tablets to replace laptops in Dubai public schools," Khaleej Times, February 15, 2016, <http://www.khaleejtimes.com/nation/education/10000-devices-to-be-given-...>

; Lughati distributes 3,100 smart tablets to Sharjah students in 54 schools,” Feb 3, 2018, <http://wam.ae/en/details/1395302664537>.

- [9](http://bit.ly/JBsX1i). “2013 a banner year in UAE education,” The National, January 1, 2014, <http://bit.ly/JBsX1i>.
- [10](https://gulfnews.com/uae/education/uae-launches-largest-e-learning-plat...). Gulf News, “UAE launches largest e-learning platform in Arab World,” 16 Oct, 2018. <https://gulfnews.com/uae/education/uae-launches-largest-e-learning-plat...>

A3 0-6 pts

Does the government exercise technical or legal control over internet infrastructure for the purposes of restricting connectivity?

36

No orders to shut down ICT networks were reported during the coverage period, but authorities restrict a number of communication platforms.

Most popular VoIP services are restricted over mobile connections. Etisalat and Du are the only companies licensed to provide paid VoIP services, while the free or low-cost OTT voice call services provided by WhatsApp, Skype, and others are only accessible through fixed-line or Wi-Fi connections. In August 2018, users reported that Du had unblocked the voice chat function within various online video games.[1](#) WhatsApp’s voice feature was blocked shortly after it was introduced in 2015,[2](#) as was a similar feature offered by Facebook.[3](#) Viber has been banned since 2013, along with FaceTime, Apple’s video chat product.[4](#) Apple agreed to sell its iPhone products to UAE mobile phone companies without the FaceTime app preinstalled, though it can be used on phones purchased outside the country.[5](#) The VoIP feature for Discord, a chatting app used by gamers, was blocked in 2016.[6](#) During 2018, the TRA discussed unblocking Skype and FaceTime with Microsoft and Apple, though restrictions had yet to be lifted as of May 2019.[7](#)

Seeking to improve connectivity within the country, Etisalat and Du have launched their own carrier-neutral international internet exchange points (IXPs), called SmartHub and Datamena, respectively.[8](#) Etisalat maintains its nationwide fiber-optic backbone. In 2015 the company selected TeliaSonera International Carrier (TSIC) as its preferred global internet backbone provider.[9](#)

- [1](https://gulfbusiness.com/uaes-du-unblocks-voice-chat-feature-games/). Gulf Business, “UAE’s Du unblocks voice chat feature for some games,” 02 Aug 2018. <https://gulfbusiness.com/uaes-du-unblocks-voice-chat-feature-games/>

- 2. 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>.
- 3. Joseph George, “Facebook Messenger video calls blocked in UAE?” Emirates 24/7, May 21, 2015, <http://bit.ly/1KbtMVG>.
- 4. Dow Jones, “Viber seeks to circumvent ban in Middle East,” The National, June 10, 2013, <http://bit.ly/1LQ4unr>.
- 5. Reporters Without Borders, “Countries Under Surveillance: United Arab Emirates.”
- 6. “UAE gamers voice anger as Discord chat app blocked by Etisalat,” The National, March 30, 2017, <http://www.thenational.ae/uae/technology/uae-gamers-voice-anger-as-disc...>
- 7. The National, “Microsoft 'hopeful' of deal to lift Skype ban in UAE,” Aug 30, 2018. <https://www.thenational.ae/uae/microsoft-hopeful-of-deal-to-lift-skype-...>
- 8. “Etisalat launches internet exchange hub,” CommsMEA, November 19, 2012, <http://bit.ly/1hfcjEE>.
- 9. “Etisalat selects TeliaSonera International Carrier as global internet backbone provider,” Telegeography, March 11, 2015, <http://bit.ly/1LOBrKN>.

A4 0-6 pts

Are there legal, regulatory, or economic obstacles that restrict the diversity of service providers?

26

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. The country’s two largest mobile service providers, Etisalat and Du, are both controlled by the state. The government maintains a 60 percent stake in Etisalat through its ownership in the Emirates Investment Company,1 while a majority of Du is owned by various state companies.2 Du pays a percentage of its profits and revenue as a dividend to the government, which owns 39.5 percent of the company through its sovereign wealth fund, the Emirates Investment Authority.3 In 2015, the government announced a decision to allow up to 20 percent of Etisalat shares to be held by foreign investors.4

In 2017, the Emirates Integrated Telecommunications Company (EITC), one of the companies that owns Du, launched a new mobile service provider under the Virgin Mobile brand. Due to the EITC's ownership of Du, the new provider was not required to obtain a separate license.<sup>5</sup>

In April 2018, Etisalat announced "the first global cybersecurity alliance" with Singapore's Singtel, Japan's Softbank, and Spanish blue chip firm Telefonica,<sup>6</sup> which will reach over one billion consumers in 60 countries. The alliance will pool together network intelligence on threats to cybersecurity, in addition to combining resources to serve customers.<sup>7</sup>

- <sup>1.</sup> Maher Chmaytelli, "Etisalat Plans to Allow Foreigners 'Soon,' Khaleej Says," Bloomberg Business, July 29, 2012, <http://bloom.bg/1NJ7wdM>.
- <sup>2.</sup> du, "Shareholders structure," accessed June 7, 2013, <http://www.du.ae/en/about/corporate-governance/shareholders>.
- <sup>3.</sup> Alexander Cornwell, "Du says royalty payments to federal government unlikely to change," Gulf News, February 9, 2016, <http://gulfnews.com/business/economy/du-says-royalty-payments-to-federa...>
- <sup>4.</sup> Rory Jones, "UAE to Allow Foreign Ownership of Etisalat Shares," Wall Street Journal, June 23, 2015, <http://on.wsj.com/1LvnOo0>.
- <sup>5.</sup> "Du owner to bring Virgin Mobile brand to UAE," The National, January 31, 2017, <http://www.thenational.ae/business/telecoms/du-owner-to-bring-virgin-mo...>
- <sup>6.</sup> "UAE's Etisalat forms global cyber security alliance with foreign firms," April 12, 2018. [http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2018-04/12/c\\_137106482.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2018-04/12/c_137106482.htm)
- <sup>7.</sup> Singtel.com, "Etisalat Singtel Softbank and Telefonica create global cyber security alliance," 12 April 2018. <https://www.singtel.com/about-Us/news-releases/etisalat-singtel-softban...>

A5 0-4 pts

Do national regulatory bodies that oversee service providers and digital technology fail to operate in a free, fair, and independent manner?

04

Regulatory bodies frequently fail to operate in a free and fair manner. The TRA oversees service providers and makes executive decisions regarding monitoring, filtering, and banning services and websites, without any oversight or transparency. Providers must follow the laws and regulations set by the TRA, which was

established in 2003 to manage “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 service providers, establishing and implementing a regulatory and policy framework, and promoting new technologies.<sup>1</sup>

The TRA’s current chairperson is Major General Talal Hamid Belhoul, who was also appointed director-general of the State Security Department in Dubai in 2017.<sup>2</sup> The current director of the TRA, Hamad al-Mansoori, was appointed in 2015. Among the many government positions he has held, al-Mansoori is also the chairperson of the Mohammed Bin Rashid Space Center and the vice chairman of the Emirates Space Agency.<sup>3</sup>

- <sup>1</sup>. Telecommunications Regulatory Authority, “Brief History,” accessed Oct 1st, 2015, <http://www.tra.gov.ae/brief-history.html>.
- <sup>2</sup>. Gulf News, “Mohammad appoints State Security chief in Dubai,” March 3, 2017. <https://gulfnews.com/uae/government/mohammad-appoints-state-security-ch...>; <https://www.tra.gov.ae/en/about-tra/board-of-directors.aspx>, accessed August 15, 2019
- <sup>3</sup>. Telecommunications Regulatory Authority, “Know the director general,” <https://www.tra.gov.ae/en/about-tra/know-the-dg.aspx>, accessed August 2019

## **B Limits on Content**

*Authorities continued to block a number of websites containing criticism of the government and other sensitive content. In recent years, the repressive environment, marked by the threat of legal action or harassment, as well as high levels of surveillance, has led to increased self-censorship. Social media influencers engaged in commercial activity were required to obtain a license from the National Media Council based on regulations instituted in March 2018.*

B1 0-6 pts

Does the state block or filter, or compel service providers to block or filter, internet content?

16

While ISPs are required by the TRA to block content related to terrorism,

pornography, and gambling, as well as political speech threatening to the ruling order (see [B3](#)), in practice, authorities commonly block websites that criticize the government or tackle social taboos. Blocking has emerged as a political tool through which authorities sought to isolate Qatar, which Bahrain, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE had accused of supporting “terrorist” groups, notably the banned Muslim Brotherhood. In 2017, authorities blocked a number of Qatari media sites amid this dispute, including Al Jazeera Live.[1](#)

In October 2018, the TRA reported that it had blocked 1,666 websites in the first half of the year, compared to 2,256 during the same period in 2017. Using automatic filtering systems, 47.6 percent of the websites were blocked for pornographic content, 28 percent for scams and fraud, and the rest for drugs, piracy, terrorism, and other “illegal activities.”[2](#) In March 2019, the government blocked the newly established news site Al Estiklal, which is critical of a number of regimes in the region.[3](#) In April 2019, a blogger reported that the citizen media platform Global Voices was apparently blocked by Etisalat.[4](#)

Many other sites critical of the government have been blocked, including the UK-based, English-language news site Middle East Eye, which was blocked in 2015 after it published articles exposing the country’s harsh surveillance practices and poor human rights record.[5](#) The New Arab, which is based in the United Kingdom and funded by a Qatari businessman, was blocked in 2015 without explanation.[6](#) Also in 2015, authorities blocked Arabic-language sites run by news agencies in Iran, such as Al-Alam TV, over allegations they disseminated antigovernment propaganda.[7](#)

The Beirut-based Gulf Center for Human Rights[8](#) is blocked,[9](#) as is the LGBT+ sports news site Outsports.[10](#) In July 2018, the Canadian digital rights organization Citizen Lab reported that the website of the International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, and Intersex Association was blocked in the UAE, using internet filtering technology produced by the Canadian company Netsweeper.[11](#)

Several political blogs,[12](#) a number of atheist and secular websites,[13](#) at least one site disseminating news on Emirati political detainees and prison conditions,[14](#) and sites related to the Muslim Brotherhood and regional nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) are blocked.[15](#) The website of the Islamic Human Rights Commission (IHRC) was also blocked during the coverage period.[16](#) Users have reported the blocking of social media content relating to political detainees in the past,[17](#) as well as Archive.today, a tool that retains URLs that might be removed

from the internet or be modified.[18](#)

According to a 2013 Citizen Lab Report, ISPs use advanced tools such as SmartFilter, Netsweeper, and Blue Coat ProxySG to censor content.[19](#) The organization 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.[20](#) Citizen Lab again confirmed the use of NetSweeper in an April 2018 report.[21](#)

- [1.](#) “Al Jazeera Live website ‘blocked in UAE’,” May 24, 2017. <http://www.arabianbusiness.com/al-jazeera-live-website-blocked-in-uae--...>
- [2.](#) Arabian Business “TRA blocks 1666 violating websites,” 7 Oct 2018. <https://bit.ly/2U1ATNa>
- [3.](#) <https://twitter.com/IMarathon/status/1125495711682850817>
- [4.](#) <https://twitter.com/saniaazizr/status/1120975737069158400>
- [5.](#) “UAE Escalates its Crackdown on News Portal, Blocks Fars News Agency” ANHRI, July, 11, 2016, <http://anhri.net/?p=169056&lang=en>.
- [6.](#) “United Arab Emirates blocks The New Arab website,” Al Araby, December 22, 2015, <http://www.alaraby.co.uk/english/news/2015/12/29/united-arab-emirates-b...>
- [7.](#) “UAE authorities block website of Alalam,” Al Alam, October 26, 2015, <http://www.alalam.ir/news/1753262>.
- [8.](#) Gulf Center For Human Rights (GC4HR), “United Arab Emirates: GCHR website blocked in UAE,” January 29, 2015, <http://bit.ly/1hGc1as>.
- [9.](#) Blog no longer active: Emirati Illuminati (blog), <http://www.emirates-illuminati.org/uae-blocks-emirates-illuminati/>.
- [10.](#) <https://twitter.com/outsports/status/856613726492835840>
- [11.](#) Sarah McKune, “Citizen Lab Open Letter in Advance of the Equal Rights Coalition Global Conference (August 5-7, 2018, in Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada),” July 31, 2018. <https://citizenlab.ca/2018/07/citizen-lab-open-letter-equal-rights-coal...>
- [12.](#) Including Noonpost, Sasapost, and Arabi21. See: [https://twitter.com/search?f=tweets&vertical=default&q=%23blocked\\_sites...](https://twitter.com/search?f=tweets&vertical=default&q=%23blocked_sites...)
- [13.](#) Modern Discussion, <http://www.ahewar.org/>, Help us document blocked Internet Sites in UAE,” <http://bit.ly/1e00dxW>, , “Modern Discussion,” , and ladeeni.net, “Ben Kreishan.” The inactive atheist blog “Arab Atheism” [arabel7ad.blogspot.com](http://arabel7ad.blogspot.com) is still blocked

- [14.](https://explorer.ooni.io/measurement/20190311T084842Z_AS197207_tdOy40js...)
- [15.](https://explorer.ooni.io/measurement/20190311T084842Z_AS197207_tdOy40js...) Twitter, Hashtag, #Blocked\_sites\_in\_UAE, <http://bit.ly/1RK5Q2a>.
- [16.](https://explorer.ooni.io/measurement/20190430T230622Z_AS5384_uqtjV1t0NF...)
- [17.](https://explorer.ooni.io/measurement/20190430T230622Z_AS5384_uqtjV1t0NF...) Blocked social media content remains available for users with encrypted https connections unless the company or the owner removes it. Salloh, Twitter Post [in Arabic], May 5, 2015, 7:01 AM, <http://bit.ly/1hGrqYg>.
- [18.](http://bit.ly/1VU6LTA) Reddit, "Archive.today blocked in UAE (United Arab Emirates)," November 21, 2014, <http://bit.ly/1VU6LTA>.
- [19.](http://bit.ly/1ZFRSna) Greg Wiseman et. al., "Appendix A: Summary Analysis of Blue Coat 'Countries of Interest'," CitizenLab, January 15, 2013, <http://bit.ly/1ZFRSna>.
- [20.](http://bit.ly/1P1PLas) Bennett Haselton, "Smartfilter: Miscategorization and Filtering in Saudi Arabia and UAE," CitizenLab, November 28, 2013, <http://bit.ly/1P1PLas>.
- [21.](https://citizenlab.ca/2018/04/planet-netsweeper/) <https://citizenlab.ca/2018/04/planet-netsweeper/>

B2 0-4 pts

Do state or nonstate actors employ legal, administrative, or other means to force publishers, content hosts, or digital platforms to delete content?

14

The TRA has also been able to censor selected content on platforms such as YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter, according to local users. Facebook occasionally receives government requests to remove content. Between January and June 2018, Facebook reported that it had "restricted access in the United Arab Emirates to one Instagram account alleged to violate the country's cybercrime laws in response to a report from the Office of HRH Princess Haya Bint Al Hussein."<sup>1</sup> Restrictions on one Facebook post, one Instagram account, and 24 Instagram "media" were made between July and December 2018 for "items alleged to violate local prostitution and hate speech laws," as well as "a private report of defamation."<sup>2</sup>

In the first half of 2018, Google reported receiving three takedown requests from the UAE regarding "regulated goods and services."<sup>3</sup> Twitter reported 112 removal requests from the UAE government from July to December 2018, of which it complied with none.<sup>4</sup>

- [1.](https://transparency.facebook.com/content-restrictions/country/AE) <https://transparency.facebook.com/content-restrictions/country/AE>
- [2.](https://transparency.facebook.com/content-restrictions/country/AE) <https://transparency.facebook.com/content-restrictions/country/AE>

- [3. https://transparencyreport.google.com/government-removals/by-country/AE...](https://transparencyreport.google.com/government-removals/by-country/AE...)
- [4. Twitter, "Removal Requests," Transparency Report, 2017, https://transparency.twitter.com/en/removal-requests.html.](https://transparency.twitter.com/en/removal-requests.html)

B3 0-4 pts

Do restrictions on the internet and digital content lack transparency, proportionality to the stated aims, or an independent appeals process?

24

Some restrictions on digital content lack proportionality and fairness. The TRA instructs ISPs to block content related to terrorism, pornography, and gambling, as well as websites that contain political speech considered threatening to the ruling order.

Using banned VoIP services through VPNs is punishable under a law that bars the use of VPNs to commit a crime, as well as cybercrime and telecommunications regulatory laws.<sup>1</sup> Convictions under cybercrime laws can lead to a fine of between 500,000 (\$136,000) and 2 million dirhams (\$544,000), jail time, or both. <sup>2</sup>

Du details the criteria it uses to block sites 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, LGBT+ content, gambling sites, unlicensed VoIP services, terrorist content, and material that is offensive to religion.<sup>3</sup> No similar list has been made available by Etisalat, although the company invites users to request the blocking or unblocking of sites.<sup>4</sup> Du also allows users to send unblocking requests to a designated email address and blocking requests through an online form.<sup>5</sup> However, neither company provides information on whether sites have been unblocked as a result of requests.<sup>6</sup> Twitter users sometimes monitor when sites are blocked to combat the lack of transparency,<sup>7</sup> but the TRA has also called on social media users to help report "suspicious" content for blocking.

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."<sup>8</sup> Website owners and employees may also be held liable for defamatory material appearing on their sites.<sup>9</sup> Regulations instituted in October 2018 require

social media influencers to identify content defined as advertisements (see B6) and allow the National Media Council to remove content that violates the guidelines.<sup>10</sup>

- 1. Haneen Dajani, "Use of VPN in the UAE still confusing despite recent law change," The National, August 9, 2016, <http://www.thenational.ae/uae/government/use-of-vpn-in-the-uae-still-co...>
- 2. "Use of VPN in the UAE still confusing despite recent law change," The National, August 9, 2016, <http://www.thenational.ae/uae/government/use-of-vpn-in-the-uae-still-co...>
- 3. Du, "Prohibited Content Categories," July 29, 2008, <http://bit.ly/1LmaBKL>; <http://lighthouse.du.ae/Annex-1-EN.pdf>
- 4. Etisalat, "Blocking and Unblocking Internet Content," accessed on April 28, 2013 <https://www.etisalat.ae/en/generic/contactus-forms/web-block-unblock.jsp>
- 5. <https://www.du.ae/personal/support/articledetail?artid=PROD-15183&lang=...>; <https://www.du.ae/surfsafely>
- 6. See Etisalat\_Care, Twitter Post, December 30, 2015, 5:52 AM, <http://bit.ly/1LmlQD2>; and <https://twitter.com/dutweets/status/414787641620430848Evans> [offline].
- 7. See <https://twitter.com/saniaazizr/status/1120975737069158400>
- 8. See Federal Decree-Law no. (5) of 2012 on Combating Cybercrimes, August 13, 2012, <http://bit.ly/1gDnVCj>.
- 9. Awad Mustafa, "Cyber-crime law to fight internet abuse and protect privacy in the UAE," The National, November 13, 2012, <http://bit.ly/1VUaATh>.
- 10. Arabian Business, "UAE unveils new regulations for online, social media advertisements," 30 Oct 2018. <https://www.arabianbusiness.com/media/407073-uae-unveils-new-regulation...>

B4 0-4 pts

Do online journalists, commentators, and ordinary users practice self-censorship?

04

Self-censorship online has worsened in recent years, due to the risks of legal action or harassment in retaliation for online activities, as well as high levels of surveillance. Virtually nobody within the country speaks out on political and other sensitive issues.<sup>1</sup> Local news sites, 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, further chilling the environment for online expression.<sup>2</sup>

- <sup>1</sup>. <https://www.amnesty.org/en/countries/middle-east-and-north-africa/unite...>, accessed August 2019;  
<https://www.alaraby.co.uk/english/news/2019/6/23/tolerant-uae-finally-r...>
- <sup>2</sup>. 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>.

B5 0-4 pts

Are online sources of information controlled or manipulated by the government or other powerful actors to advance a particular political interest? 14

The government has allegedly manipulated the online information landscape to advance its interests. In 2014, the government spent more than \$12 million on public relations firms, which some observers suspect have been deployed to counter allegations of human rights abuses online.<sup>1</sup> A large number of anonymously operated Twitter accounts appear dedicated to harassing and intimidating political dissidents and their families online. In an article published after the coverage period in July 2019 by Al Jazeera, experts pointed to thousands of bot accounts attempting to influence views on the Qatar blockade crisis by spreading fake news, retweeting officials, and amplifying hashtags. While the source of these accounts is unclear, according to the report, “prominent Twitter influencers in Saudi and the UAE later tweeted about the bot-created subject, that was then picked up by ‘real people.’”<sup>2</sup>

- <sup>1</sup>. Akbar Shahid Ahmed. “How Wealthy Arab Gulf States Shape The Washington Influence Game,” Huffington Post, February 9, 2015, [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/arab-gulf-states-washington\\_us\\_55e6...](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/arab-gulf-states-washington_us_55e6...)
- <sup>2</sup>. Yarno Ritzen, The fake Twitter accounts influencing the Gulf crisis,” Aljazeera, July 21, 2019. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/07/fake-twitter-accounts-influencin...>

Are there economic or regulatory constraints that negatively affect users' ability to publish content online?

Authorities impose economic and regulatory constraints that limit the ability of antigovernment websites to produce content online. For example, the government reportedly pressured the Dubai-based advertising agency Echo to end its advertising contract with the US-based news outlet *Watan*.<sup>1</sup>

In March 2018, the state media oversight body, the National Media Council, announced new regulations for electronic media that would govern "all online activities, including e-commerce; publishing and selling of print, video, and audio material; as well as advertising." Social media influencers who engage in commercial activities or promote products must now apply for licenses, which are awarded based on a number of qualifications, such as age, a clean criminal record, good reputation, and a university degree.<sup>2</sup> The regulations went into effect at the beginning of the reporting period.<sup>3</sup>

In October 2018, the council issued 19 rules for advertising, stating that "advertisements must be identified on social media clearly." The rules also include "showing respect for the UAE's systems and policies at an internal level and its relations with other countries, avoiding images that harm public morality, respecting intellectual property rights and a ban on tobacco advertising of any kind." Violators could be subject to a 5,000 dinar (\$1,360) fine, with additional fees if the fine is not paid within five days. Repeat violations could lead to fines of up to 20,000 dinars (\$5,400).<sup>4</sup>

- <sup>1</sup>. 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>.
- <sup>2</sup>. "Council unveils new regulations for electronic media," March 6, 2018. <http://gulfnews.com/news/uae/media/council-unveils-new-regulations-for-...>
- <sup>3</sup>. <https://www.emirates247.com/news/emirates/electronic-media-regulations-...>
- <sup>4</sup>. Arabian Business, "UAE unveils new regulations for online, social media advertisements," 30 Oct 2018. <https://www.arabianbusiness.com/media/407073-uae-unveils-new-regulation...>

B7 0-4 pts

Does the online information landscape lack diversity? 14

The blocking of antigovernment and other sensitive content ([see B1](#)) and the criminalization of VPNs limit the diversity of the online information landscape. Moreover, many local news sites self-censor, further reducing the diversity of viewpoints online ([see B4](#)). However, according to Northwestern University in Qatar's 2018 Media Use in the Middle East survey, 71 percent of UAE nationals accessed news online.<sup>1</sup>

- [1. http://www.mideastmedia.org/survey/2018/](http://www.mideastmedia.org/survey/2018/)

B8 0-6 pts

Do conditions impede users' ability to mobilize, form communities, and campaign, particularly on political and social issues?

36

Some Emiratis push back against government repression through online activism, but the repressive legal and regulatory environment limits their effectiveness. In the past, families of political prisoners frequently 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 due to escalating arrests and prosecutions. With widespread arrests, intimidation, surveillance, and retaliation that users face for speaking out online, the only voices critical of the regime today are based abroad.

In response to the 2017 blocking of Skype, a user initiated an online petition to unblock it, which received thousands of signatures. The TRA responded by blocking Change.org, the platform on which the petition was posted.<sup>1</sup> The law prohibits calling for, promoting, and collecting donations online without obtaining prior permission and licensing from authorities.<sup>2</sup>

- [1. "UAE angers residents by blocking Skype—then blocks petition against ban," Jan 16, 2018. http://www.euronews.com/2018/01/16/uae-angers-residents-by-blocking-sky...](#)
- [2. https://www.thenational.ae/uae/government/everything-you-need-to-know-a...](https://www.thenational.ae/uae/government/everything-you-need-to-know-a...)

## C Violations of User Rights

*Prominent activist Ahmed Mansour's 10-year prison sentence on a cybercrime charge was upheld in December 2018, while users were detained for social media posts. Surveillance activities are conducted with little judicial oversight, and a January 2019 investigation revealed that US intelligence agents had been recruited into a hacking program that spied on targets including dissidents, political opponents, activists, and journalists. Leaked documents from August 2018 revealed the government's use of NSO Group spyware on similar targets.*

C1 0-6 pts

Do the constitution or other laws fail to protect rights such as freedom of expression, access to information, and press freedom, including on the internet, 06 and are they enforced by a judiciary that lacks independence?

Article 30 of the constitution states that freedom of opinion “shall be guaranteed within the limits of law,” though many laws can effectively limit free speech online, and these rights are not respected in practice.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, the judicial system is not independent, as there is significant executive influence.<sup>2</sup>

- <sup>1</sup>. “Constitution of the United Arab Emirates,” Refworld, accessed August 1, 2013, <http://bit.ly/1k7kUvC>.
- <sup>2</sup>. <http://www.ohchr.org/EN/HRBodies/HRC/RegularSessions/Session29/Document...>

C2 0-4 pts

Are there laws that assign criminal penalties or civil liability for online activities? 04

There are a number of laws that assign criminal penalties for online activities. 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.<sup>1</sup>

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.<sup>2</sup> The cybercrime law also criminalizes offending the state and its rulers or symbols, and insulting religion. Calls to change the system of government are punishable by life imprisonment. Authorities have repeatedly warned foreign nationals that they must also follow the country's restrictive laws.<sup>3</sup> In 2017, the government expanded the cybercrime law to criminalize "sympathy for Qatar," which can be punished with a 15-year prison sentence and a fine.<sup>4</sup>

In August 2018, the president amended three articles in the cybercrime law. Changes to Article 26 stipulate harsher penalties for enabling communication between terrorist groups or any other "unauthorized group." The broadly worded article provides for 10 to 25 years of imprisonment and a fine between 2 million (\$544,000) and 4 million dirhams (\$1.1 million). It also prescribes up to five years in prison and a fine between 500,000 (US\$136,000) and 1 million dirhams (\$272,000) for inciting hatred. The other two amendments are related to incitement, endangering national security and state interests (Article 28), and deporting foreigners (Article 42).<sup>5</sup>

In January 2019, an official from the Interior Ministry listed ten types of social media activities considered illegal under the cybercrime law: defaming or disrespecting others, violating privacy, filming people or places and posting these videos without permission, spreading fake news and rumors, manipulating personal information, blackmail and threats, establishing websites or accounts that violate local regulations, inciting immoral acts, posting work-related confidential information, and establishing or managing websites or accounts to coordinate with terrorist groups.<sup>6</sup>

Broadly worded provisions of a 2015 hate speech law, which criminalize insults to "God, his prophets or apostles or holy books or houses of worship or graveyards," open individuals up to criminal charges for expressing nonviolent opinions on religion. Penalties under the law range from prison terms between six months and ten years and fines between 50,000 (\$13,600) and 2 million dirhams (\$544,000).<sup>7</sup> 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.<sup>8</sup> The law specifically covers online as well as offline speech.

Terrorism offenses are punishable by life imprisonment, death, and fines of up to

100 million dirhams (\$27.2 million).<sup>9</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>10</sup>

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.<sup>11</sup> Articles 70 and 71 of a 1980 publishing law prohibit criticism of the head of state, Islam, or any other religion.<sup>12</sup> In 2016, Dubai police reiterated that posting pictures of others without permission can lead to six months in jail and a fine between 150,000 (\$41,000) and 500,000 dirhams (\$136,000).<sup>13</sup>

- <sup>1</sup>. Human Rights Watch, "GCC/US: Obama Should Press Gulf Rulers," May 12, 2015, <http://bit.ly/1IO8K2l>.
- <sup>2</sup>. See Federal Decree-Law no. (5) of 2012 on Combating Cybercrimes, August 13, 2012, <http://bit.ly/1gDnVCj>.
- <sup>3</sup>. "New UAE cyber crime laws: Jail for indecent posts," Emirates 24/7, November 14, 2012, <http://bit.ly/1EPrBtK>.
- <sup>4</sup>. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/bahrain-and-uae-...>
- <sup>5</sup>. Gulf News, "Khalifa issues amendments to UAE Cybercrimes Law," 13 August 2018. <https://gulfnews.com/uae/government/khalifa-issues-amendments-to-uae-cy...>
- <sup>6</sup>. Emarat alYoum, "10 violations on social media that lead to prison," 11 Jan 2019 <https://www.emaratalyoum.com/local-section/accidents/2019-01-11-1.11715...>
- <sup>7</sup>. "UAE Anti-discriminatory Law bans hate speech, promotion of violence," Emirates 24/7, July 22, 2015, <http://www.emirates247.com/news/government/uae-anti-discriminatory-law-....>
- <sup>8</sup>. See Human Rights Watch, "United Arab Emirates," World Report 2016, <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2016/country-chapters/united-arab-emir...>, and Amnesty International, "United Arab Emirates 2015/2016," Annual Report, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/countries/middle-east-and-north-africa/unite...>
- <sup>9</sup>. AFP, "UAE toughens anti-terrorism laws," Al Arabiya, August 21 2014, <http://ara.tv/j8cc4>.
- <sup>10</sup>. Human Rights Watch, "UAE: Terrorism Law Threatens Lives, Liberty," December 3, 2014, <http://bit.ly/1NdV6st>.
- <sup>11</sup>. Human Rights Watch, "UAE: Free Speech Under Attack," January 25, 2012, <http://bit.ly/1k7mjSl>.

- [12.](#) Federal Law No. 15 of 1980 Governing Publications and Publishing, <http://bit.ly/1VUyHGE>.
- [13.](#) “Fines and jail for posting pictures of others without permission,” al-Bawaba, February 25, 2016, <http://bit.ly/2exHKJl>.

C3 0-6 pts

Are individuals penalized for online activities? 16

The government routinely jails individuals for posting political, social, or religious opinions online, and long prison sentences were handed down on such charges in recent years. Online activists face arbitrary detention.

In December 2018, a court rejected activist Ahmed Mansour’s final appeal on a 10-year prison sentence and 1 million dirham (US\$272,000) fine. Reports also suggested that he would be subject to three years of surveillance after his release.[1](#) He was sentenced in May 2018 on cybercrime charges following a series of closed proceedings[2](#) and had been in detention since his arrest in 2017 for “spreading sectarianism and hatred on social media,”[3](#) after calling on Twitter for the release of human rights activist Osama al-Najjar.[4](#) During his arrest, 12 security officers searched Mansour’s house for electronic devices, confiscating laptops and cell phones belonging to him as well as his family members.[5](#) Activists said he was held in solitary confinement, and was not given access to a lawyer during his trial.[6](#)

Nasser bin Ghaith—a human rights activist and former lecturer at the Abu Dhabi branch of the Paris-Sorbonne University— was sentenced to 10 years in prison in 2017 after being convicted on a range of charges primarily related to his nonviolent speech published online.[7](#)

In May 2019, a man was arrested in Dubai for filming and posting a viral video of a dispute between a hotel worker and a woman after she refused to pay for valet parking service. At the end of the coverage period, he faced charges under Article 21 of the cybercrime law for violating the privacy of others, which is punishable by up to six months in prison and a 500,000 dirham (\$136,000) fine.[8](#)

In March 2019, a man was arrested for insulting local traditions after posting a satirical video on social media, in which he wore formal Emirati clothing while surrounded by women and throwing money around.<sup>9</sup> His arrest may have been the result of user reporting.<sup>10</sup>

In July 2018, the Abu Dhabi prosecutor's office issued an arrest warrant for three social media influencers who had participated in a viral dance challenge involving moving vehicles and posted it on social media. They were charged with putting people's lives at risk and promoting "practices that are incompatible with the UAE's values and traditions."<sup>11</sup>

Several foreigners were arrested for social media posts under the harsh cybercrime law during the coverage period. In April 2019, a British woman was arrested at an airport in Dubai for insulting Facebook comments she posted about her ex-husband's new wife. She was detained under the cybercrime law and released after paying a 3,000 dirham (\$815) fine.<sup>12</sup>

Even after serving their sentences, many prisoners of conscience remain imprisoned in "counselling centers."<sup>13</sup> For example, at the end of the coverage period, Osama al-Najjar remained in detention in a counselling center despite having served out his three-year sentence.<sup>14</sup> He was sentenced to three years in prison and fined \$136,000 in 2014 for tweets alleging that his father, who was imprisoned during the UAE 94 trial (in which 94 democracy activists were tried on trumped up coup charges in 2013), was tortured by security forces.<sup>15</sup> He was found guilty of belonging to the banned political group al-Islah, spreading lies, and instigating hatred against the state through Twitter.<sup>16</sup> He was released in August 2019, after the reporting period.<sup>17</sup>

- <sup>1</sup>. Reuters, "UAE court upholds 10-year jail sentence of rights activist Mansoor," 31 Dec 2018. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-emirates-security/uae-court-upholds-...>
- <sup>2</sup>. <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2018/05/uae-activist-ahmed-manso...>
- <sup>3</sup>. "Amnesty renews demand for release of UAE activist Mansour," Middle East Monitor, May 12, 2017, <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20170512-amnesty-renews-demand-for-re...>
- <sup>4</sup>. "United Arab Emirates: Ahmed Mansoor taken to court after a year in arbitrary detention; while Dr. Nasser Bin Ghaith denied visits," April 12, 2018.

<http://www.gc4hr.org/news/view/1829>

- [5.](#) “Amnesty renews demand for release of UAE activist Mansour,” Middle East Monitor, May 12, 2017, <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20170512-amnesty-renews-demand-for-re...>
- [6.](#) <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2018/05/uae-activist-ahmed-manso...>
- [7.](#) Naser al Remeithi, “Former university lecturer appears in court accused of inciting hatred in UAE,” The National, May 2, 2016, <http://www.thenational.ae/uae/courts/former-university-lecturer-appears...>
- [8.](#) Mariam Al Serkal, “Dubai Police detains man for filming viral video,” Gulf News, May 1, 2019. <https://gulfnews.com/uae/crime/dubai-police-detains-man-for-filming-vir...>
- [9.](#) The New Arab, “Man Arrested for insulting UAE culture in viral video,” 1 April 2019. <https://www.alaraby.co.uk/english/news/2019/4/1/man-arrested-for-insult...>
- [10.](#) <https://www.thenational.ae/uae/man-arrested-in-dubai-after-sharing-vide...>
- [11.](#) The National, “Abu Dhabi orders arrest of three influencers for taking part in 'In my feelings' challenge,” 23 July 2018. <https://www.thenational.ae/uae/transport/abu-dhabi-orders-arrest-of-thr...>
- [12.](#) <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-47847740>
- [13.](#) Emirates Center for Human Rights. “Osama Al-Najjar ...Two years in arbitrary detention,” 19 March 2019. <http://echr.org.uk/news/osama-al-najjar-two-years-arbitrary-detention>
- [14.](#) “Authorities must release human rights defender Osama-Al-Najjar who remains in arbitrary detention despite serving his sentence,” GC4HR, May 11, 2017. <http://www.gc4hr.org/news/view/1588>.
- [15.](#) GC4HR, Hear their Voices: Alarming Times for Human Rights Defenders in the Gulf Region & Neighboring Countries, February 2015, <http://bit.ly/1G1wKkA>.
- [16.](#) 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>.
- [17.](#) <https://advox.globalvoices.org/2019/08/09/uae-frees-activist-osama-al-n...>

C4 0-4 pts

A number of laws limit anonymous communication online. Amendments to the cybercrime law passed in 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” can face a fine of between 500,000 (\$136,000) and 2 million dirhams (\$544,000), as well as prison time.<sup>1</sup> The clause may refer to VPNs used to circumvent censorship, which help disguise the user’s location. A prison sentence was not specified in the law; however, considering that cyber violations are now treated as crimes rather than misdemeanors, prison terms for those convicted would likely be at least three years.<sup>2</sup> 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.”<sup>3</sup> Also in 2016, authorities blocked the encrypted messaging app Signal.<sup>4</sup>

In 2014, the Ministry of Interior announced plans to link identification cards with internet and mobile service “to crack down 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>5</sup> In order to retain service, mobile phone users were required to reregister personal information as part of the 2012 TRA campaign “My Number, My Identity.”<sup>6</sup> Cybercafé customers are also required to provide their ID and personal information.<sup>7</sup>

- <sup>1</sup>. “Dh500,000 fine if you use fraud IP in UAE,” Emirates 24/7, July 22, 2016, <http://www.emirates247.com/news/emirates/dh500-000-fine-if-you-use-frau...>
- <sup>2</sup>. “A legislative amendment that increases cybercrimes from misdemeanour to felony,” Emarat al Youm, January 17, 2016, <http://www.emaratalyoum.com/local-section/other/2016-01-17-1.860078>.
- <sup>3</sup>. “Using VPNs: What UAE residents need to know,” Gulf News, August 2, 2016, <http://gulfnews.com/news/uae/crime/using-vpns-what-uae-residents-need-t...>
- <sup>4</sup>. “Encryption App ‘Signal’ Fights Censorship With a Clever Workaround,” Wired, December 21, 2016, <https://www.wired.com/2016/12/encryption-app-signal-fights-censorship-c...>
- <sup>5</sup>. 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>.
- <sup>6</sup>. 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>.

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

C5 0-6 pts

Does state surveillance of internet activities infringe on users’ right to privacy?

06

State surveillance is widespread and infringes on users’ right to privacy. It is unclear whether there is any meaningful legal oversight of government surveillance operations.

A Reuters investigation published in January 2019 revealed that a group of former US intelligence agents were part of Project Raven, an Emirati hacking program that allowed the UAE to surveil militants and other governments, as well as dissidents, political opponents, activists, and journalists. Some of the latter targets were foreigners. The project was ultimately transferred from a US contractor to a UAE-based cybersecurity firm, DarkMatter, in 2016.<sup>1</sup> One of the tools used from 2016 to 2017 enabled DarkMatter to hack into targets’ iPhones and access their information. The UAE had bought the platform, called Karma, from an unnamed vendor.<sup>2</sup> The project operatives were also ordered to monitor social media platforms and target individuals who, according to security forces, had insulted the government. One of the operatives said, “Some days it was hard to swallow, like [when you target] a 16-year-old kid on Twitter.”<sup>3</sup>

In February 2018, Faisal al-Bannai, the founder of DarkMatter, denied activists' allegations that the firm was involved in hacking activities. About 80 percent of DarkMatter's customers are UAE government agencies, including the Dubai police. Al-Bannai has suggested that the police are capable of compiling hours of surveillance video in order to track anyone in the country.<sup>4</sup>

Moreover, documents leaked in August 2018, which were used in two lawsuits against the Israeli technology company NSO Group, showed that the UAE had been using NSO's Pegasus spyware for at least a year against foreign government figures, journalists, and activists. Pegasus can be covertly installed on a person's smartphone after they have clicked on a malicious link, giving hackers access to information on the device.<sup>5</sup>

In 2016, a Danish newspaper revealed that a Danish subsidiary of the British defense contractor BAE Systems was selling surveillance equipment to UAE officials. The equipment was reportedly capable of deep packet inspection (DPI), "IP monitoring and data analysis" for "serious crime," and "national security" investigations.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, in 2015 the UAE government signed a contract with an Israeli surveillance company to launch the so-called Falcon Eye project, a powerful, countrywide surveillance project also known as the Abu Dhabi Safe City.<sup>7</sup>

In 2016, an official from the Dubai police said authorities monitor users on 42 social media platforms.<sup>8</sup> A TRA official also stated, "We have started monitoring all the social media channels—all websites and profiles are monitored."<sup>9</sup>

- <sup>1</sup>. Reuters, "Ex-NSA cyberspies reveal how they helped hack foes of UAE," 30 Jan 2019. <https://www.reuters.com/investigates/special-report/usa-spying-raven/>
- <sup>2</sup>. Joel Schectman and Christopher Bing, "UAE Used Cyber Super-Weapon to Spy on iPhones of Foes," Reuters, January 30, 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/investigates/special-report/usa-spying-karma/>.
- <sup>3</sup>. Christopher Bing, Joel Schectman, "Special Report: Inside the UAE's secret hacking team of U.S. mercenaries," Reuters, Jan 30, 2019. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-spying-raven-specialreport/speci...>
- <sup>4</sup>. Associated Press, "U.A.E. Cyber Firm DarkMatter Slowly Steps Out of the Shadows," Feb 1, 2018 <https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2018/feb/1/uae-cyber-firm-darkmatt...>
- <sup>5</sup>. David D. Kirkpatrick and Azam Ahmed, "Hacking a Prince, an Emir and a

Journalist to Impress a Client,” New York Times, August 31, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/08/31/world/middleeast/hacking-united-arab...>

- [6.](#) “BAE Systems Sells Internet Surveillance Gear to United Arab Emirates,” The Intercept, August 26, 2016. <https://theintercept.com/2016/08/26/bae-systems-sells-internet-surveill...>
- [7.](#) “Falcon Eye: The Israeli-installed mass civil surveillance system of Abu Dhabi,” Feb 28, 2015. <http://www.middleeasteye.net/news/uae-israel-surveillance-2104952769>
- [8.](#) “Emirates operate online police to monitor users,” Cairo Portal, February 24, 2016, <http://bit.ly/2ebBVlh>.
- [9.](#) “UAE in crackdown on social media abuse,” Arabian Business, March 10, 2015, <http://bit.ly/1FKCiuW>.

C6 0-6 pts

Are service providers and other technology companies required to aid the government in monitoring the communications of their users?

06

ISPs and mobile service providers are not transparent about the procedures authorities use to access users’ information. Service providers reportedly monitor content on behalf of the police and security forces, while Etisalat is required, through its license, to store call logs and possess equipment that allows the TRA to access “its network and the retrieval and storage of data for reasons of public interest, safety, and national security.”[1](#) Metadata and call information from the VoIP services offered by Etisalat and Du can be obtained by the government.[2](#)

In its transparency report covering July to December 2018, Facebook reported receiving eight requests for users’ data, three of which were emergency requests, while five were made through the standard legal process.[3](#) Two requests were made to Google and three to Twitter during the same period.[4](#)

- [1. https://thelawreviews.co.uk/edition/the-technology-media-and-telecommun...](https://thelawreviews.co.uk/edition/the-technology-media-and-telecommun...)
- [2. https://smex.org/syria-voip-censorship/](https://smex.org/syria-voip-censorship/)
- [3. https://transparency.facebook.com/government-data-requests/country/AE](https://transparency.facebook.com/government-data-requests/country/AE)
- [4. https://transparency.twitter.com/en/countries/ae.html;](https://transparency.twitter.com/en/countries/ae.html)  
[https://transparencyreport.google.com/user-data/overview?hl=en&user\\_req...](https://transparencyreport.google.com/user-data/overview?hl=en&user_req...)

C7 0-5 pts

Are individuals subject to extralegal intimidation or physical violence by state authorities or any other actor in retribution for their online activities?

25

Some online activists face enforced disappearances and torture in retaliation for their activities.<sup>1</sup> Nasser bin Ghaith, who was sentenced to 10 years in prison in part for tweets critical of the Egyptian government, reported that he was detained in poor conditions and subject to torture while on trial, including extended periods in solitary confinement.<sup>2</sup> He has gone on several hunger strikes since 2017 (see C3) and has been denied access to medical care.<sup>3</sup>

Activist Ahmed Mansour, who was detained in 2017 in connection with his social media use and later sentenced to 10 years' imprisonment in May 2018 (see C3), began a hunger strike in March 2019 to bring attention to his case and substandard prison conditions.<sup>4</sup> As of May 2019, he had put an end to the strike but remained in solitary confinement.<sup>5</sup> He had also been harassed for years by the government prior to his imprisonment. Authorities froze 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.<sup>6</sup>

Political dissidents and their families are frequently harassed and intimidated via Twitter.

- <sup>1</sup>. Human Rights Watch, "United Arab Emirates," World Report 2016, <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2016/country-chapters/united-arab-emir...>
- <sup>2</sup>. "UAE Sentences Dr. Nasser bin Ghaith to 10 Years in Prison," ADHRB, March 29, 2017. <http://www.adhrb.org/2017/03/uae-sentences-dr-nasser-bin-ghaith-10-year...>
- <sup>3</sup>. <https://www.gc4hr.org/news/view/2031>
- <sup>4</sup>. <https://advox.globalvoices.org/2019/04/15/jailed-uae-activist-ahmed-man...>
- <sup>5</sup>. <https://www.gc4hr.org/news/view/2133>
- <sup>6</sup>. "UAE: Surprise overnight raid leads to arrest of prominent human rights defender," Amnesty International, March 20, 2017, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2017/03/uae-surprise-overnight-r...>

C8 0-3 pts

Are websites, governmental and private entities, service providers, or individual users subject to widespread hacking and other forms of cyberattack? 23

Activists have faced repeated technical attacks designed to deceive them into downloading spyware. In May 2019, reports emerged that NSO Group, whose spyware enabled various countries to surveil journalists and activists, exploited a security flaw in WhatsApp to hack into targets' mobile devices. The flaw may have been used to hack the UAE's targets.<sup>1</sup> In 2016, a report from the *New York Times* asserted that the UAE government paid the Italian cybersecurity firm Hacking Team more than \$634,000 to target 1,100 devices with spyware.<sup>2</sup> Through a forensic investigation by cybersecurity expert Bill Marczak, human rights activist Ahmed Mansour discovered that he had been repeatedly targeted with sophisticated spyware from FinFisher and Hacking Team.

In 2016, Citizen Lab helped Mansour investigate a link he received in an SMS, which was a "sophisticated piece of malware that...would have allowed the attackers to get full control of Mansour's iPhone." The spyware was provided by NSO Group.<sup>3</sup> Another report by Citizen Lab demonstrated five cases where arrests or convictions of users followed malware attacks against their Twitter accounts from 2012 to 2015.<sup>4</sup>

In 2016, an official with DarkMatter said that 5 percent of global cyberattacks targeted victims in the UAE.<sup>5</sup> The TRA said it had "successfully foiled 1,054 cyberattacks" targeting private companies and government entities that year.<sup>6</sup> Also in 2016, Dubai police arrested foreign hackers accused of blackmailing five senior White House officials over emails.<sup>7</sup>

- <sup>1</sup>. <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/05/13/technology/nso-group-whatsapp-spying...>; Alaraby, "Israeli spyware company that sold snooping software to Saudi Arabia, UAE linked to WhatsApp hack," May 14, 2019, <https://www.alaraby.co.uk/english/news/2019/5/14/israeli-spyware-compan...>
- <sup>2</sup>. Nicole Perlroth. "Governments Turn to Commercial Spyware to Intimidate Dissidents" *New York Times*, May 29, 2016, <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/05/30/technology/governments-turn-to-commer...>
- <sup>3</sup>. "Government Hackers Caught Using Unprecedented iPhone Spy Tool," Aug 25, 2016. [https://motherboard.vice.com/en\\_us/article/3da5qj/government-hackers-ip...](https://motherboard.vice.com/en_us/article/3da5qj/government-hackers-ip...)

- [4.](#) Bill Marczak, John Scott-Railton, “Keep Calm and (Don’t) Enable Macros: A New Threat Actor Targets UAE Dissidents,” Citizen Lab, May 29, 2016, <https://citizenlab.org/2016/05/stealth-falcon/>.
- [5.](#) “UAE a target of 5 per cent of global cyber attacks,” Gulf News, May 12, 2016. <http://gulfnews.com/news/uae/crime/uae-a-target-of-5-per-cent-of-global...>
- [6.](#) “TRA foiled more than 1000 cyber attacks last year,” Emirates 24/7, March 16, 2017. <http://www.emirates247.com/crime/local/tra-foiled-more-than-1000-cyber-....>
- [7.](#) “Dubai cops arrest hackers targeting White House staff,” The Detroit, April 3, 2017. <http://www.detroitnews.com/story/news/world/2017/04/03/dubai-us-hackers....>



## Country Facts

- **Freedom in the World Status**  
Not Free
- **Networks Restricted**  
No
- **Social Media Blocked**  
Yes
-

## **Websites Blocked**

Yes

- 

## **Pro-government Commentators**

Yes

- 

## **Users Arrested**

Yes

## **Previous Reports**

- [2018 Report](#)