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**Submission on the United Arab Emirates
July 2012**

The UAE government has taken advantage of political tension in the region since the start of the Arab spring to tighten its control over information and communications. Five netizens known as the “UAE 5” were detained for several months, learning the hard way that the regime’s priority is to maintain its stability and, if necessary, to set a few harsh examples.

A targeted and up-to-date Internet filtering system

A technological leader in the Arab world, the United Arab Emirates is also well versed in online censorship. A very strict filtering system targets pornographic content. Websites that are forums for dissident political opinions, non-orthodox views of Islam or criticism of society, particularly the royal family, religion or human rights violations, are also rendered inaccessible. The localnewsuae.com, arabtimes.com, aepriosn.com, uaetorture.com and uaehewar.net websites and the uaehewar.net Facebook page and Twitter group are often blocked or banned.

Widespread surveillance

The UAE was spared the demonstrations that rocked the political life of some of its neighbours in 2011. The regime did not hesitate to raise salaries in order to head off any threat of social unrest and, in its determination to take whatever action was necessary to monitor the population’s mood, it was quite open about its surveillance of the Internet.

Col. Abdul Rahim bin Shafi, director of the Interior Ministry’s organized crime department, [told Reuters](#) in August 2011 that the police were keeping a close watch on social networks such as Twitter and Facebook: “All media are being monitored, including social media. People can express their opinion without violating (social) norms,” he said. “Twitter and Facebook were invented to make the world easier but if they are used adversely, the perpetrators will be punished by law.” The regime’s targets were made clear: “Whoever spreads false or malicious news or statements or spreads propaganda that could upset public security could spend between one month and three years in jail.” He acknowledged that the large community of foreign workers, which had already gone on strike to demand better working conditions, was under particularly close scrutiny.

Smartphone and cell phone users under pressure

New restrictions were imposed in May 2011 on smartphones manufactured by Research in Motion (RIM). The authorities decided to limit access to the highly secure BlackBerry Enterprise Server (BES) to a few companies with more than 20 users.

A new campaign was announced at the end of June 2011, under which the Telecommunications and Regulatory Authority (TRA) would require all mobile phone users in the UAE to re-register their SIM cards from mid-July onwards, officially to address the issue of the fraudulent and criminal use of handsets, by providing valid identification documents such as passports, ID cards and residency visas.

Arbitrary arrests to intimidate dissidents

The UAE 5

To discourage potential dissidents from relaying calls for political reform, the authorities arrested five netizens in April 2011 – the well-known blogger **Ahmed Mansour**, administrator of the pro-democracy discussion forum Al-Hewar (“the Dialogue”), blogger **Farhad Salem Al-Shehh**, co-administrator of this forum, **Nasser bin Ghaith**, a writer and professor at Abu Dhabi’s Paris-Sorbonne University, and human rights activists **Hassan Ali Al-Khamis** and **Ahmed Abdul Khaleq**. All five detainees, dubbed the “UAE 5,” had expressed their opinions freely online and were among the hundred or so people who had signed a petition urging the authorities to enact reforms. Ahmed Mansour was arrested after giving an interview to Al Hurra TV.

Bloggers and their families have been the targets of particularly violent death threats and smear campaigns orchestrated by the authorities in the media and on the Internet. Those who tried to defend them also incurred the regime’s wrath. Twitter user Rowda Hamed was threatened and summoned for questioning for supporting their views.

The trial of the UAE 5 was such a travesty of justice that they refused to appear in court and went on a hunger strike to protest against their mistreatment and prison conditions. On 27 November 2011, they were finally convicted of “insulting Emirate leaders” and “calling for anti-government demonstrations.” Ahmed Mansour was sentenced to three years in prison. The other four were sentenced to two years. They were pardoned the next day by the president, Sheikh Khalifa bin Zayed Al-Nahyan, and were released shortly thereafter. Their equipment and passports have not been returned to them.

Other cases

Saleh Al-Dhufairi, a netizen who is very active on social networks ([@SalehAlDhufairi](#)), was arrested on 9 March 2012 and was held in Abu Dhabi’s Al-Wathba prison until released on bail 11 days later. He is charged with using Twitter to “incite sedition” and “abuse religion.” Dhufairi had been covering sensitive subjects such as the “UAE 7,” a group of pro-democracy activists whose citizenship was withdrawn after they urged the government to carry out political reforms and organize elections, and criticized state security department meddling in political matters. He is to be tried by a state security court but no trial date has so far been set.

The blogger Juma Al-Felasi ([@jalfelasi](#)) was attacked by an unidentified group as he was driving in Dubai on 6 March. His assailants pulled him from his car and beat him, accusing him of sullyng the image of the

UAE's rulers. Felasi is known for criticizing government policies and for calling for democratic reforms in his blog posts.

Mohamed Abdul Razzaq Al-Siddiq, one of the "UAE 7," was arrested at his home without a warrant in the northeastern emirate of Al-Sharjah at 4 a.m. on 24 March following a [comment on Twitter](#) accusing the emirate's ruler, Sultan Al-Qassimi, of discriminating against the UAE's large expatriate population. He was released later in the day after paying a fine, and will not be prosecuted.

Dubai police chief Dhahi Khalfan used Twitter to threaten and warn human rights activist **Khalifa Al-Nuaimi** ([@Alnuaimi k](#)) that police were coming to arrest him on 13 March. In the end, Nuaimi was not arrested.

Outspoken blogger's deportation

The [deportation of Ahmed Abdul Khaleq](#), a blogger and member of the UAE 5 group of pro-democracy activists, seemed imminent as this report was being drafted. He was arrested on 22 May after being summoned to the immigration department in the northeastern emirate of Ajman in connection with his statelessness.

Upcoming amendment of cyber crime law raises concerns

According to the Ministry of Interior, [changes will be made to the cyber crime law](#) before the end of the year. They will include longer jail sentences for defaming "the symbols of the state," and supplementary penalties such as temporary bans on convicted persons using modern technology, such as mobile phones, and possibly the Internet. This is seen as another way of targeting dissidents.

1980 law on publications, a repressive law needing amendment

As a result of the 2008 UPR, the Emirati authorities undertook to reform certain laws that have been in force for years in order to "take into account the evolution of freedom of expression and opinion." However, no concrete measure has been adopted. This includes amending or repealing the 1980 law on publications, which restricts freedom of expression by means of registration requirements and content-based limitations, and provides for incarceration of offenders. The UAE's Federal National Council, a government advisory board without legislative powers, approved a draft media law in January 2009 that contained a number of improvements while still falling short of international standards. But President Khalifa bin Zayed Al Nahyan did not sign it into law and the 1980 law is still in effect.

Recommendations:

- Put an end to surveillance
- Stop arresting and harassing dissidents and activists
- Immediately release Ahmed Abdul Khaleq and suspend his deportation
- Expunge the UAE 5's convictions from their records and return all their equipment and passports.
- Cancel the requirement for mobile phone users to re-register their SIM cards
- Involve civil society and international NGOs in discussions on amending the cyber crime law so that it adheres to international standards on human rights and online free speech
- Repeal the 1980 law on publications and amend other legislation so as to bring it into line with international standards on respect for freedom of the media and information.