



Women  
Journalists  
Without  
Chains



# UAE:

**Suffocating Space for Independent Media**

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## Introduction

The United Arab Emirates (UAE) prides itself on being "a beacon" of stability amidst a region plagued by wars, conflicts, and economic turmoil. With its gleaming skyscrapers and polished image, it presents the allure of a modern oasis. However, beneath this shiny facade, a striking contradiction emerges. Despite its claims of progress and prosperity, the UAE stands out as one of the few monarchies that suppresses all forms of press freedom within its borders.

The United Arab Emirates is a federation of seven emirates, with Abu Dhabi serving as the leading emirate both in terms of size and wealth due to its abundant oil reserves. However, the political landscape in the country lacks truly democratic parliamentary elections. Half of the Parliament members are appointed rather than elected, rendering it a governmental advisory body without constitutional and legal powers. All branches of authority, including the judiciary, are under the control of the executive authority based in Abu Dhabi.

In a concerning pattern, the UAE authorities have persistently launched intimidation campaigns targeting journalists, regardless of their gender, along with official and unofficial media platforms, bloggers, and online activists. These oppressive measures have resulted in the abduction, imprisonment, and imposition of fines on journalists, while media executives have found themselves subjected to interrogations fueled by allegations of breaching ambiguous media regulations.

The UAE has enacted stringent laws characterized by broad and imprecise provisions, strategically designed to stifle both press freedom and freedom of expression. Moreover, the pervasive reach of surveillance mechanisms and stringent restrictions have profoundly impacted mainstream media outlets and online platforms. Criticism directed towards the authorities or their foreign policies can serve as a catalyst for preventing male and female journalists from entering the country, unless they are willing to face the consequences of arrest, imprisonment, or financial penalties while within its borders.

This report provides an in-depth analysis of the state of press freedom in the United Arab Emirates. It explores key aspects such as the status of independent journalism, the prevailing legal framework, the extent of online censorship, and the treatment of foreign nationals within a country where citizens account for less than 10% of the population.

## Firstly, The State of Independent Journalism in the United Arab Emirates

The current media landscape in the United Arab Emirates comprises numerous local Emirati media outlets and major international news agencies, operating together within a global environment. However, the prevailing media legislation in the UAE is characterized by both self-censorship and government control, leading to increasingly challenging conditions.

Foreign media operating from "free zones" in the UAE may have comparatively more freedom than local media, but they are still bound by UAE laws and subject to strict monitoring of their content, with criticism of the government, ruling families, rulers of the emirates, and friendly foreign governments being prohibited, along with the publication of information that could "damage the national economy" or pose a "threat to national security," carrying potential fines and prison sentences for violations.

The discussion of local public affairs is primarily limited to the local press and media outlets, with many media organizations directly or indirectly affiliated with government-owned umbrella groups such as Abu Dhabi Media and Dubai Media Corporation.<sup>1</sup> Approximately 12 newspapers are published in both Arabic and English in the UAE, alongside numerous terrestrial radio and television stations. However, the newspapers, like the Arabic-language Gulf Today and its English-language counterpart, Gulf Today, which are nominally owned by the private sector, face significant government pressure.<sup>2</sup>

Due to the highly restrictive political environment in the Emirates, characterized by the prohibition of political parties, formation of associations, trade unions, and human rights organizations, as well as strict censorship, there is a severe lack of political discourse and limited public discussion on sensitive issues within the country. This oppressive atmosphere and widespread repression make it challenging to find individuals openly addressing political matters. Consequently, the state of the press in the UAE can be described **as follows:**

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<sup>1</sup> BBC. (2011, December 20). United Arab Emirates media guide. [online] Available at: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-14704229>.

<sup>2</sup> Freedom House. (2017, May 26). Freedom of the Press 2017 - United Arab Emirates. [online] Available at: <https://www.refworld.org/docid/59fc67b4a.html>.

a) **Monopolistic Voice:** The media landscape in the UAE is characterized by a monopolistic voice, with only the pro-government perspective allowed. The regulatory framework in the UAE establishes national standards for media content, obligating all media organizations to adhere to these standards, effectively aligning with government policies, while state-owned Arabic-language media outlets dominate the local market, serving as the sole platform for the official viewpoint on local matters, with major newspapers often receiving government support and relying on the official Emirates News Agency for content and guidance, including coverage of sensitive topics. Only a small minority of UAE national journalists, coupled with the prevalence of non-UAE nationals as the majority of working journalists in the UAE, and the presence of relatively well-paid expatriate journalists who lack the incentive to undertake critical or investigative journalism due to associated risks, contribute to a discouraging environment for such journalistic pursuits.<sup>3</sup>

The local press in the UAE refrains from discussing local conditions and issues such as unemployment, rising prices, government decisions and policies, laws and decrees, demographics, and political, economic, and social reforms. Journalists who dare to cover such topics face significant penalties. An example of this occurred in September **2022** when the print edition of the Dubai-based Al-Ru'ya newspaper was shut down, and numerous journalists were terminated after publishing an article on the impact of increasing fuel prices on citizens. It is noteworthy that Al-Ru'ya newspaper is affiliated with a company owned by Sheikh Mansour bin Zayed Al Nahyan, the UAE Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Presidential Affairs.<sup>4</sup>

Regrettably, the media environment in the UAE falls also short when it comes to highlighting the poor working conditions experienced by migrant workers, specifically within the construction sector. Construction companies, in their pursuit of profit maximization and economic growth, often resort to wage deductions and subject workers to substandard working conditions. Alarming, the press tolerates these abuses perpetrated by authorities and companies, ultimately prioritizing the UAE's

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<sup>3</sup> ibid

<sup>4</sup> Associated Press (AP). (2023, August 5). Mass firing at UAE newspaper raises question of censorship. [online] Available at: <https://tinyurl.com/27cgusys>.

image as a thriving commercial showcase over addressing the challenges faced by migrant workers. Unfortunately, rather than utilizing the media to raise awareness and promote a deeper understanding of societal challenges, it is frequently wielded as a means to advance the government's viewpoint and conceal genuine news stories relevant to the society in question.

- b) ***Unions and Advocate for Media Professionals:*** Any attempt to openly establish a union and protest against any issue will be met with strict measures, thus impeding the formation of an independent union for male and female journalists to advocate for their rights. The Emirati Journalists Association, founded in 2000, has undergone multiple amendments to its bylaws, with the most recent occurring in 2022. Presently, a simulated election is being conducted within the association, overseen and managed by a government committee formed by the Ministry of Community Development.

Despite being articulated in Article 2 of the association's statute, which explicitly aims to "defend the rights and interests of journalists,"<sup>5</sup> a meticulous examination of the association's website spanning the past seven years reveals a conspicuous absence of reports or discussions concerning the protection of Emirati journalists' rights. Instead of placing significant emphasis on safeguarding press freedom within the country, the association primarily focuses on the "enshrinement of the principle of press freedom based on societal and professional ethics." While it ostensibly acknowledges the principle of press freedom in theory, its practical implementation falls short due to the inclusion of the nebulous term "society's constants," which association officials could potentially exploit to evade their responsibility to advocate for journalists. Furthermore, the association has replaced the term "press ethics" with "professional ethics," thereby enabling its officials to establish stronger associations with society and authority, prioritizing these connections over internationally recognized press ethics that explicitly prioritize the protection of journalists.

Article 6 of the Association's statute states that "Members of the Association are prohibited from interfering in matters that affect the security of the state and its system of government, or inciting sectarian, racial, or religious disputes, and it abides by all laws and regulations within the UAE." This article, while aiming to ensure compliance with

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<sup>5</sup> UAE Journalists Association. (2000, 2022). Primary Law of the Emirati Journalists Association (2000) and Amendments (2022). [online] Available at: <https://tinyurl.com/2dqfocdj>.

national laws and regulations, is criticized for its vagueness, as it can potentially be used as a means to suppress journalists who do not align with the perspectives of state officials. The Emirates Writers Union has almost disappeared in terms of its activity over the past eight years, with its complete absence in defending the rights of its members.

- c) **Source Protection:** In the United Arab Emirates (UAE), there are currently no specific laws or established practices that provide explicit protection for journalistic sources, allowing the government and security agencies to request information from entities, newspapers, or journalists if they deem it necessary for their policies and what they define as "national security."
- d) **Freedom of Access to Government Information:** In the United Arab Emirates, there are no laws guaranteeing freedom of access to government information; instead, the government independently determines which information it disseminates and provides it to accredited news organizations. In general, the press obtains its information from official government sources, with both male and female journalists frequently relying on the official social media accounts of government institutions. It is uncommon, if not nonexistent, for news gatherers to rely on unofficial sources. The government typically disseminates multiple narratives that are echoed by the media, and any contradictory narrative is often labeled as fake news or spreading rumors. The use of unofficial sources is not deemed appropriate, and the government possesses the authority to impose severe penalties, including life imprisonment, for publishing information considered to be rumors.
- e) **Self-censorship:** Due to vague red lines on permissible speech, Emirati journalists, albeit in their small numbers, practice extreme forms of self-censorship. They often face warnings and threats if they exceed the limits of acceptable media coverage, and sometimes experience dismissal or demotion.<sup>6</sup> Non-citizen journalists represent the vast majority of those working in the UAE and face more stringent measures, including dismissal, deportation, and imprisonment. The acts of repression, frequent arrests, and detention without trial that authorities employ to suppress critics, particularly those active on social media, have significantly hindered journalistic endeavors and curtailed freedom of expression across the nation.

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<sup>6</sup> Freedom House. (2017, May 26). Freedom of the Press 2017 - United Arab Emirates. [online] Available at: <https://www.refworld.org/docid/59fc67b4a.html>.

Muhammad H., a 36-year-old Emirati journalist working for a newspaper in Abu Dhabi, sheds light on the challenges faced in reporting news within the United Arab Emirates. According to him, even if journalists personally witness an accident or any noteworthy event, they are unable to publish it in the newspaper. The primary reason behind this restriction is the expectation that the editor-in-chief will prohibit its publication. Furthermore, Muhammad H. highlights that such incidents prompt an immediate report to be sent to the higher authorities, specifically the State Security - Intelligence department. Consequently, these incidents become part of the journalist's record, indicating that they are not without subsequent procedures or potential repercussions.<sup>7</sup> It appears that most male and female journalists in the UAE perceive themselves to be, at the very least in comparison to their counterparts in the region, in a better situation these days, living in a relatively safe and green area. Self-censorship has become a daily routine, and it is more detailed than government censorship. Although this advantageous condition benefits foreign journalists and even citizens, the primary drawback is the erosion of press freedom.

A 32-year-old Kenyan journalist, working for an English-language newspaper in the UAE, shared with "Women Journalists Without Chains" that upon starting their job, the editor-in-chief explicitly instructed them to disregard any journalistic work related to their host country. The journalist further stated that they are aware of the limitations and lack of freedom to discuss Emirati topics. Their primary concern is to live in a secure environment without the fear of losing their job or facing imprisonment.

Over the past decade, there has been a decline in the presence of individuals freely expressing their opinions, including those who practice criticism, in newspapers, despite their very few numbers. In September 2020, Emirati writer and poet Dhabiya Khamis Al Muhairi (65 years old) was banned from writing her column in a local newspaper and was also subjected to a travel ban. This action was taken in response to her position regarding the "Abraham" agreement, which aimed to normalize the UAE's relationship with Israel.

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<sup>7</sup> Freedom House. (2022, November 17). Communication with the report preparer using an encrypted messaging application.



## Journalism in the Emirates encounters significant obstacles:

1

State or state-affiliated entities own the majority of newspapers and media outlets.

2

Media critical of the government or its human rights record is prohibited.

3

National standards imposed by the regulatory framework stifle diverse viewpoints.

4

Independent organizations advocating for journalists face criminalization.

5

Authorities can compel journalists to disclose their sources without legal protection.

6

Absence of laws guaranteeing freedom of access to government information.

7

Journalists exercise self-censorship due to unclear boundaries.



## Secondly, Legal Environment: A Terrifying Dictatorship

The legal environment, both in the country in question and other GCC countries, displays a common pattern where the Constitution grants "freedom of expression"<sup>8</sup> but subject to the "limits of the law," although the existing laws do not genuinely guarantee this freedom, and the constitutional provision becomes practically insignificant due to the presence of supplementary laws and executive powers.

The press in the UAE operates under the strict regulations of Federal Law No. 15 of 1980, which is known as one of the harshest laws in the Arab region that severely curtails press freedom. This legislation empowers the government to exercise censorship over both local and international media content, while also prohibiting any form of criticism towards the government, its supporters, or any government officials.

The UAE has persistently refused to amend or replace the press law, despite calls for change spanning over two decades. While a new draft law for the press was approved by the Federal National Council (Parliament) in 2009, it has not been enacted as law since then.<sup>9</sup> Instead, the government has imposed additional laws that further constrain journalists' work, such as Crimes and Penal Code No. (31) and Combating Rumors and Electronic Crimes Law No. (34) of 2021, which came into effect in 2022, as well as Anti-Terrorism Crimes Law No. 7 of 2014. This situation raises concerns as it contradicts Article 11 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), which emphasizes the principle of legal certainty. This principle requires criminal laws to be sufficiently clear and specific, ensuring that individuals understand what actions constitute a crime and the consequences thereof. Vague or broad laws can be prone to arbitrary application and misuse, undermining the fundamental principles of justice.<sup>10</sup>

Due to the ambiguity of laws and concerns about crossing red lines, media outlets frequently publish government statements without critical analysis or commentary. While certain "free zones" provide comparatively more freedom for media outlets to produce content targeted at international audiences, they remain subject to UAE media laws and additional regulatory rules

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<sup>8</sup> United Arab Emirates. (2004). Constitution of the United Arab Emirates (amended in 2004). [online] Available at: [https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/United\\_Arab\\_Emirates\\_2004](https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/United_Arab_Emirates_2004).

<sup>9</sup> The National News. (2023, September 16). Media freedom in the UAE. [online] Available at: <https://www.thenationalnews.com/uae/media-freedom-in-the-uae-1.120678>.

<sup>10</sup> Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms while countering terrorism (2020), Report on the promotion and protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms while countering terrorism, UN Doc. A/75/388, 11 November 2020, available at: <https://tinyurl.com/2yxbkugc>.

and authorities. Recent legal amendments have tightened regulatory and editorial control over free zone offices, imposing even more restrictive measures on the work of journalists.

The lack of judicial independence in the UAE raises concerns regarding the trustworthiness of the Emirati judiciary in providing justice to journalists. The judiciary is subject to the executive authority, limiting its autonomy and impartiality. Criticism of the state is prohibited, and even lawyers representing detained journalists face repercussions. For instance, Mohammed Al-Roken remains imprisoned since 2012 for his legal advocacy work. These circumstances pose challenges for journalists seeking fair and independent judicial processes in the UAE.

Regarding the status of male and female journalists in UAE laws, it is important *to note the following*:

### 1. Firstly, Crimes and Penal Code

a) *Limiting The work of journalists*: The new penal code includes broad terms that can be used to restrict the work of journalists. These terms include "harming public order," "exposing state security to danger," and "disturbing public opinion." Under UAE laws, specifically Articles 215 and 217 of the Crimes and Penal Code, publishing information, news, or inciting actions that endanger state security, harm public order, disturb public security, or spread terror among people can lead to punishment.

Additionally, if such publications incite or arouse public opinion against state authorities or institutions, the penalties imposed can be doubled. These provisions potentially increase the risk and restrict the work of journalists, as they leave room for interpretation and potential misuse.

Furthermore, the article also criminalizes the possession or acquisition of documents, publications, or recordings that contain information or news capable of disturbing public security, creating terror among people, harming the public interest, inciting public opinion, or arousing excitement. The terms used in the article, such as "disturbing," "spreading terror," "inciting and provoking public opinion," and "harming the public interest," encompass a wide range of possibilities. Consequently, any news story can potentially face accusations under these provisions. It is important to note that a journalist can be subjected to punishment even if the information is factual, and even if their possession of it without publication is deemed a crime according to these articles.

b) ***Criminalizing criticism of the executive authority:*** The new penal code has introduced stricter punishments for offenses related to insulting the head of state and government institutions. According to the law, individuals who mock, insult, or damage the reputation or dignity of the head of state can be sentenced to up to **25** years in prison. Additionally, those who mock, insult, or harm the reputation, dignity, or position of the state, its authorities, institutions, founding leaders, national symbols, national anthem, or any aspect of the country's national identity can face imprisonment for up to five years and a fine of **500,000** dirhams (equivalent to **136,134** dollars). The wording used in the law, such as "prestige, status, and reputation of the state," is ambiguous and leaves room for potential misuse by the authorities, particularly in targeting journalists and curtailing freedom of expression.

Journalists can be imprisoned for up to **25** years if they publish or promote content that disrupts laws, opposes the fundamental principles of the state's governance system, or harms national unity and social peace (Articles **188** and **189**). These vague phrases can be used to target publishers of critical news and articles, including those that challenge questionable laws, raising concerns about freedom of the press and the ability to express dissenting views without severe legal repercussions. This goes against global principles as described in the Johannesburg Principles on National Security, Freedom of Expression, and Access to Information (1995), which affirm that individuals ought not to face penalties for critiquing or offending their own country, government, symbols, officials, or foreign countries, their symbols, governments, or bodies.

c) ***Criticism of officials:*** According to the provisions of the Penal Code, journalists, irrespective of gender, may face penalization for engaging in defamation by making statements or comments that expose an individual to punishment or contempt. Defamation, in this context, refers to acts that harm a person's reputation. The maximum penalty for defamation is two years of imprisonment and a fine of **20,000** dirhams. Additionally, publicly accusing others in a manner that damages their reputation without specifying a particular incident may result in a penalty of up to one year of imprisonment or a fine of up to **20,000** dirhams. It is important to note that if the accused individual is a public employee, the penalty can be increased to up to three years of imprisonment. It should be emphasized that the act of publishing such news

and comments in newspapers or media is considered an aggravating circumstance. The UAE's endeavor to restrict criticism of public officials compromises a fundamental principle of press freedom that should be more expansive. When it comes to freedom of expression concerning politicians, government officials, and public figures, these individuals, by virtue of their positions, have acknowledged that their official conduct and specific aspects of their private lives are susceptible to legitimate scrutiny and criticism by the public, including both male and female journalists.

- d) ***Disclosure of Defense Secrets***: The Penal Code stipulates a severe punishment for the disclosure of "defense secrets," with a penalty of life imprisonment imposed on individuals who engage in activities such as broadcasting, possessing, or retaining publications, recordings, data, or information related to state defense secrets. These secrets encompass various aspects, including news and information pertaining to actions taken to uncover internal security movements, such as arbitrary political arrests and the apprehension of perpetrators, as well as details concerning the progress of investigations and trials that are prohibited from being broadcasted by the investigating authority or the competent court. These provisions are outlined in Articles 168 and 179 of the Penal Code.
- e) ***Prosecution of Information Sources***: In the UAE, there is a lack of legislation safeguarding the confidentiality of journalists' sources of information, thereby granting authorities the right to access and obtain such sources. Furthermore, severe penalties are imposed on government employees who may collaborate with journalists, media entities, or external human rights organizations. The law specifies that any public employee or individual entrusted with a public service who discloses a state defense secret shall face the punishment of life imprisonment, as stated in Article 167.

It is also deemed an offense, punishable by imprisonment ranging from three to 15 years, for any individual to gather, without proper authorization from the competent authority, information, data, objects, documents, designs, statistics, or any related materials with the intent to transmit them to a foreign country, group, organization, or entity, regardless of its name or nature, or to someone acting on their behalf. This provision directly impacts journalists, the local community, and officials who share information with international media outlets, independent human rights organizations, or United Nations human rights experts.

- f) ***Political Relations:*** Authorities impose penalties, including life imprisonment, on male and female journalists who criticize any foreign country that may potentially harm the political relations of the Emirates. If the court determines that significant harm has occurred, the death penalty may be applied. Furthermore, the law stipulates a minimum imprisonment term of five years and a fine of no less than **100,000** UAE dirhams (\$27,225) for acts of criticism conducted through writing, speech, drawing, statements, or any form of information technology or media.

The UAE's history of convictions, such as the case of Jordanian journalist Ahmed Al-Atoum in October 2020, demonstrates the threat to male and female journalists residing in the country if they criticize the policies of their home countries. Al-Atoum was sentenced to ten years in prison by an Emirati court for peaceful Facebook posts that criticized the Jordanian government, under charges of "acts against a foreign country" that could harm political relations and endanger UAE's security, solely based on his peaceful criticism of the Jordanian royal family and government.<sup>11</sup> In March 2022, authorities in the UAE arrested Nepali journalist Umakant Pande after he criticized his country's embassy in Abu Dhabi in a Facebook post, accusing it of irregularities in visa issuance.<sup>12</sup> It is unclear whether Pande is still in custody.

- g) ***Publishing in Court Cases:*** Pursuant to the law, it is prohibited to publish news or documents pertaining to ongoing investigations, and violation thereof is subject to a penalty of imprisonment for a maximum period of two years or a fine. Furthermore, the law prohibits the publication of court deliberations or news related to cases designated for secret sessions or subject to publication restrictions imposed by the court. Additionally, the dissemination of information from public court sessions without honesty and in bad faith is deemed unlawful. These provisions are specifically delineated in Articles 313 and 314 of the relevant legislation.

## 2. Secondly, Law on Combating Rumors and Cybercrimes

Since January 2023, this law has superseded the previous Law No. 5 of 2012 concerning the combat of information technology crimes. The previous legislation had been utilized in the past

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<sup>11</sup> Human Rights Watch (2021, February 11). UAE: Jordanian Convicted for Criticizing Jordan on Facebook. Retrieved from <https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/02/11/uae-jordanian-convicted-criticizing-jordan-facebook>.

<sup>12</sup> Freedom Forum (2022, March 31). Freedom Forum condemns detention of Nepali journalist Pande in Dubai with alleged collusion of Nepali Embassy. Retrieved from <https://tinyurl.com/222jtf3k>.

decade to target journalists and individuals expressing their opinions within the Emirates. However, the new law fails to address the problematic provisions of its predecessor and, instead, imposes harsher penalties in cases related to publishing and freedom of expression, thereby exacerbating its impact on journalists and their work.

- a) ***Criminalization of Criticism:*** According to Article (1) of the law, any content that has the potential to harm the state's security, its interests, relationships with other countries, or undermine public confidence in the performance of state authorities or institutions is deemed illegal. This broad definition encompasses any form of criticism, opinion, or expression, including those shared on social media platforms or messaging applications. Both the publishers and disseminators of such content are subject to punishment under the law. Furthermore, Article (23) of the law stipulates a penalty of imprisonment and a fine of up to **1,000,000 UAE dirhams (\$272,249)** for the use and dissemination of internet information with the intent to incite actions, spread information, news, cartoons, or any other images that endanger the state's security, its vital interests, or disrupt public order. )))))))Article (24) of the law establishes a penalty of imprisonment and a fine of up to **1,000,000 UAE dirhams** for individuals who publish information, data, or news that could harm national unity, social peace, public order, or jeopardize the interests of the state. Additionally, this article stipulates a prison term of up to five years for publishing news, statements, cartoons, visual materials, or any form of content with the intention to mock, damage the reputation or stature of the state, its authorities, institutions, or any of its national symbols.

This law's broad and ambiguous terms enable authorities to hold individuals legally accountable for any online content or written material that is perceived as criticism towards them. As a result, journalists face significant limitations in freely expressing their opinions and providing critical analysis, both within the country and internationally. This situation effectively isolates them from sharing alternative facts and ideas that challenge the preferred narratives of the media outlets they are associated with.)))))))A notable case illustrating the impact of a similar provision occurred in **2017** when an Emirati court sentenced the Jordanian journalist Taysir Al-Najjar to three years in prison and imposed a fine of **500,000 UAE dirhams (\$136,000)** for Facebook posts he had made years earlier. These posts contained criticisms of Egypt, Israel, and Gulf countries while Al-

Najjar was residing in Jordan, prior to his relocation to the UAE for work. Unfortunately, Al-Najjar passed away in February 2021 in Jordan, two years after his release from prison in the UAE.

- b) ***Commitment to the Authority's Standards:*** The law includes a provision that directly targets electronic media and imposes penalties of imprisonment and fines of up to 300,000 UAE dirhams for individuals responsible for managing websites or electronic accounts. They can be held accountable if they publish content, data, or information that does not conform to the media content standards set by the relevant authorities. These standards<sup>13</sup> significantly infringe upon freedom of the press and freedom of expression, as they effectively reduce the media to a mere platform for disseminating the authority's preferred trends and policies.
- c) ***Punishments for Writing About or Critiquing Public Officials:*** Anyone who uses the information network or information technology to publish or incite information or ideas that aim to overthrow or change the state's government system, seize it, disrupt the country's laws or constitution, or oppose the fundamental principles upon which the country's system of government is based, is subject to a life sentence under Article (20). According to Article 21, individuals who publish information or data on the Internet to support the ideas of a "terrorist group, organization, or association" may face severe penalties in the United Arab Emirates (UAE). These penalties include a potential prison sentence of up to 25 years and a fine of up to 4 million dirhams (\$1,088,998). However, it is worth noting that the UAE's list of terrorist groups has been subject to significant international criticism. This criticism stems from the inclusion of peaceful and advocacy groups and organizations, such as the Cordoba Foundation in London, CARE in the United States, and the UAE Society for Call for Reform. Furthermore, the classification of political opponents as terrorists is also a matter of concern.<sup>14</sup>

The law forbids assigning responsibility for an incident to any person, and the punishment becomes more severe if the person implicated is a public employee and if the incident would lead to their punishment or disdain from others. In accordance with

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<sup>13</sup> Content Guidelines on Internet Websites (2023, September 10). Content Guidelines on Internet Websites. Retrieved from <https://tinyurl.com/28ypdb4s>.

<sup>14</sup> Human Rights Watch (2021, November 21). UAE: Dissidents Labeled 'Terrorists'. Retrieved from <https://www.hrw.org/ar/news/2021/11/21/380452>.

Article 43, individuals who are convicted of this offense may be subjected to imprisonment and a maximum fine of five hundred thousand dirhams.

Moreover, the law also criminalizes the act of a journalist, regardless of gender, publishing news or information that contradicts official announcements. The prescribed punishment for this offense includes a minimum prison sentence of one year and a minimum fine of one hundred thousand dirhams. This penalty applies in cases where the published or broadcasted content includes provocative propaganda that incites public opinion, poses a threat to public interest, disrupts public security, spreads fear among people, or causes harm to public interest, national economy, public order, or public health, as stated in Article 52.

Notably, if such actions result in incitement or the arousal of public opinion against state authorities or institutions, or if they occur during times of epidemics, crises, emergencies, or disasters, the penalty is doubled. During the outbreak of Covid-19, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) implemented a ban on publications, except for official information released by the authorities. In November 2020, an Emirati court handed down a two-year prison sentence to two individuals, one of whom was a television journalist. The sentence was in response to a report they had produced regarding the death of five members of a single family as a result of the Coronavirus.<sup>15</sup>

- d) ***Enforcing Penalties for Media Cooperation:*** According to Article 22 of the law, individuals who share information and documents online, which the UAE considers detrimental to the interests of the state, government agencies, or their reputation, prestige, or status, can face imprisonment as a punishment. This provision effectively prohibits any form of cooperation with journalists, human rights organizations, and media institutions, as the act of submitting documents, even if they are true and accurate, has been criminalized.
- e) ***Penalties for Insulting Foreign Countries:*** Article 28 of the law outlines the penalties for individuals who publish information or data online, through computer networks or any information technology means, that includes insulting a foreign country. The prescribed punishment includes a minimum prison term of six months and a maximum fine of five

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<sup>15</sup> New Arab. (2020, August 26). UAE jails two over 'fake news' coronavirus deaths story. Retrieved September 1, 2023, from <https://www.newarab.com/news/uae-jails-two-over-fake-news-covid-19-deaths-story>.

hundred thousand dirhams. This article can have significant implications for journalists residing in the UAE, particularly if they engage in criticism of foreign governments.

## The Legal Environment for Journalism in the UAE



The United Arab Emirates (UAE) has enacted restrictive laws impacting journalism. Here are some key points highlighting the challenges faced by journalists:

Stringent press law

Criminalized executive criticism

Criticizing officials is a crime

Restriction on defense matters

Punishment for information sources

Suppression of contradictory information

Censorship of foreign relations

Criminalization of publishing in court cases

Strict compliance with authority standards

High penalties, including capital punishment

### 3. Thirdly, Censorship and Repression

Under Telecommunications and Digital Government Regulatory Authority, UAE telecommunications are subjected to control and supervision as per Federal Law and Decree No. 3 of 2003. The nation's state security agencies engage in broad hacking directed at people thought to be government opponents as well as monitoring actions targeting newspapers, male and female journalists<sup>16</sup>. These organizations specifically target critical speech while monitoring both public and private online communications. It is thought that they conduct their surveillance activities using cutting-edge commercial espionage products.

In recent years, prominent journalists and political commentators have faced imprisonment for their criticism of the authorities, advocacy for dissidents or human rights, and calls for political reform. Notably, human rights activist Ahmed Mansour, who remains in prison as of the end of August 2023, was sentenced to 10 years in prison in 2018. His conviction stemmed from using social media to allegedly "spread false information that harms the country's reputation" when discussing the UAE's human rights record.

Here are some *notable means* of surveillance employed to suppress the practice of "free press" in the country:

- a) ***Emirates Media Council***: The National Media Council, established in 2006, is supposed to be the sole legitimate regulator of media in the UAE<sup>17</sup>. However, recent developments indicate a shift in responsibilities. In 2021, the Media Regulatory Office<sup>18</sup> assumed a major role, taking over many of the duties previously held by the National Council. Subsequently, in January 2023, the Emirati President issued a decree establishing the "National Media Office" and appointed Sheikh Zayed bin Hamdan bin Zayed Al Nahyan, the son of the president's brother, as its head. It remains unclear whether the National Media Council has been entirely replaced or if it continues to coexist with the newly established National Media Office.

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<sup>16</sup> Freedom House. (2023). Freedom in the World 2023: United Arab Emirates. Retrieved September 1, 2023, from <https://freedomhouse.org/country/united-arab-emirates/freedom-world/2023>.

<sup>17</sup> Greenslade, R. (2009, April 16). UAE aims to stifle press freedom. [Website]. The Guardian. Retrieved from <https://www.theguardian.com/media/greenslade/2009/apr/16/dubai-press-freedom>.

<sup>18</sup> Media Regulation Office - Ministry of Culture and Youth. (n.d.). [Website]. Retrieved from <https://mcy.gov.ae/en/mro/>.

It is the job of the new office to oversee and guide newspapers. Its duties include coming up with and creating general media policies, strategies, and plans for the state, overseeing their implementation, forming alliances with international media organizations, protecting and enhancing the state's reputation, working with pertinent media organizations to align the state's media vision and mission locally and internationally, developing the country's media system to serve the national interest, and enhancing the country's media landscape. The office seeks to create a robust and effective media environment that advances the nation's interests and strengthens its position in the international media scene.<sup>19</sup>

In February 2023, the UAE introduced the "Emirates Media Council" under the National Media Office. This council is tasked with overseeing the regulation and licensing of media outlets, including both traditional and digital publishing, even those operating within free zones. Consequently, the scope for international media within free zones has become more restricted, potentially placing them under similar regulations as official and local Emirati media.

The Emirates Media Council monitors all media content in the UAE, including the free zones, and regulates the registration and accreditation of media professionals and foreign correspondents. This indicates involvement from the Emirati executive authority in shaping the operations of foreign media outlets and their correspondents in the country.

According to a foreign journalist working for a foreign English-language media outlet in Dubai, who shared their perspective with "Women Journalists Without Chains," the new council increases oversight and scrutiny of journalists' backgrounds. There are reports of potential expulsion or entry bans based on information from the Emirati intelligence service. Concerns arise regarding restrictions on discussing topics that could harm the Emirates' interests, including foreign policy. The journalist also noted the lack of clear standards for imposed boundaries and the expectation for journalists to serve as mouthpieces for the authorities' internal and foreign policies.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> The National Media Office "... Is the UAE witnessing a more independent media?", accessed January 19, 2023, available at: <https://www.uae71.com/posts/103890>.

<sup>20</sup> The journalist, who requested anonymity, communicated with the authors of the report through an encrypted chat application on July 1, 2023.



1

Emirates Media Council:  
Regulates and licenses  
media outlets and  
journalists.

2

Internet censorship: UAE  
imposes special  
censorship on journalists  
and media.

3

Spyware surveillance: Abu  
Dhabi monitors journalists  
within and outside the country.

4

Lack of data privacy  
protection: UAE lacks  
adequate data and  
privacy safeguards.

5

VPN criminalization: Using VPN  
software to evade surveillance  
is a criminal offense.

b) *Internet as Platform for Retribution Against Press Freedom and Freedom of Expression*: The authorities in the UAE have displayed a deep concern regarding the Internet, as it has effectively cornered and marginalized both the local and international press. Over the past decade, Abu Dhabi has adopted an oppressive approach to online surveillance, targeting Emirati citizens and residents. These measures are part of a broader repressive agenda aimed at maintaining an increasingly authoritarian grip on journalism and citizen journalism, which is a cause for significant disapproval.

The UAE's behavior reveals deep concern over the significant growth in its Internet user population,<sup>21</sup> with **77.6%** embracing connectivity by **2016** and ranking second in social media penetration in the Middle East. The rising popularity of social media platforms and messaging apps intensifies this preoccupation.<sup>22</sup>

Online, there is no room for independent UAE journalism, and many local news websites and bloggers engage in self-censorship, which narrows the range of opinions available. Due to limits imposed by electronic media and social media legislation as well as other laws like "electronic penalties and crimes," there is essentially no perspective criticizing the authorities in the press or on social media.

In addition to prohibiting the websites of human rights organizations that criticize the UAE's poor record on human rights, the UAE also bans independent Emirati news websites that broadcast from Europe, such as "Emirates 71" and "Emirates Center for Studies and Media - EMASC," along with dozens of other independent electronic newspapers. The UAE responded to criticism of the media blackout by stating that it "does not support a free press."<sup>23</sup>

The Communications Regulatory Authority assumes the role of overseeing internet regulations and compiling a roster of websites subject to monitoring, effectively circumventing external scrutiny by the public or journalists. Consequently, this practice frequently results in the blocking of websites deemed by the authorities as posing

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<sup>21</sup> Statista. (2023). Internet user penetration in the United Arab Emirates from 2013 to 2019. <https://www.statista.com/statistics/484923/internet-user-reach-uae/>.

<sup>22</sup> Unknown author. (2017, February 13). Qatar, UAE have highest social media penetration: report. Retrieved from <https://tinyurl.com/2a59n7em>.

<sup>23</sup> Ghobash, O. (2017, June 29). UAE ambassador: 'We do not promote idea of press freedom'. Middle East Eye. <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/uae-ambassador-we-do-not-promote-idea-press-freedom>.

political risks, detrimental to the nation's welfare, or constituting a menace to national security.

Social media networks are typically seen as platforms for free expression across most Middle Eastern countries. However, in the UAE, specifically on the X platform (formerly known as Twitter), it has transformed into a perilous space for residents. Cyberspace has now become a favored hunting ground for targeting opponents and critics. Shockingly, even the mildest comments can result in imprisonment. One notable case is that of Osama Al-Najjar, the son of a member of the "UAE 94" group. This case involved the sentencing of 94 UAE journalists and intellectuals on charges of "overthrowing the government," where their statements and expression of opinions were exploited as evidence for their conviction.

In March 2014, Al-Najjar was arrested and subsequently sentenced to three years in prison along with a fine of 500,000 dirhams. The charges against him included "designing and managing a website on social media platforms with the intention of spreading inaccurate and sarcastic ideas and information, defaming state institutions," as well as "inciting hatred towards the state and establishing contact with foreign organizations." These allegations stemmed from his criticism of his father's prolonged detention and his plea to the country's leaders for his release, which he expressed on Twitter. Following the completion of his sentence, Osama Al-Najjar was held in a counseling center and was only released in 2019 through an amnesty program.<sup>24</sup>

Due to his Twitter criticism of the authorities and other comments in which he spoke critically on the anniversary of a brutal attack carried out by the Egyptian regime in Rabaa al-Adawiya in 2013, the economist and academic Nasser bin Ghaith was detained and sentenced to ten years in prison in March 2017. Tortured and frequently on hunger strike, Bin Ghaith.

After a diplomatic dispute between Qatar and the UAE erupted in July 2017, Abu Dhabi publicly announced that UAE citizens who publicly express support for Qatar on social media could face up to 15 years in prison and a fine of at least \$500,000 Emirati dirham (\$136,000).

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<sup>24</sup> Unknown author. (2023, September 7). UAE releases activists on Eid amnesty: rights groups. Retrieved from <https://tinyurl.com/2488na23>.

In February 2022, videos posted on social media showed the UAE Defense Forces intercepting missiles fired at the capital by the Yemeni Houthis. Those who posted the videos were subpoenaed by the Public Prosecution in Abu Dhabi.

- c) ***Cybersecurity ... Spying on Reporters:*** As part of a larger system of population surveillance, the UAE uses communications and the Internet to impose special censorship on male and female journalists and the media. The Gulf state has made more technological and technical advancements over the past ten years, which it has utilized to restrict and monitor the work of both male and female journalists.

The UAE operates a highly sophisticated surveillance system that extends its reach to all online platforms and even physical public spaces. By exploiting the Cybercrime Law and recent social media regulations, the state wields its power to suppress any form of opinion or expression, thereby severely hampering the work of journalists. This oppressive environment forces users to engage in self-censorship online, stifling free speech and inhibiting the free flow of information. Some of the restrictions that should be emphasized **include the following:**

- a) ***Data Protection:*** Despite the issuance of a data protection law in 2021 by the UAE, which imposes hefty fines of up to 500,000 dirhams (\$136,000) for illegal data collection and misuse, the presence of various exceptions and exemptions raises concerns about potential abuse. One glaring loophole is the exclusion of government entities that control or process personal data from the law's purview (Article 2). This means that a substantial amount of personal data remains exempt from privacy safeguards, with no external oversight to ensure accountability. By allowing public sector bodies to operate outside the bounds of this law, it effectively permits unchecked collection and processing of personal data by state entities, without any limitations on the nature, extent, or methods of processing. Most alarmingly, this grants impunity to the entire public sector in the event of any breach of citizens' personal data, absolving them of any responsibility or consequences.<sup>25</sup>

The data protection law requires consent from data subjects for transferring their data abroad, but this consent is contingent on not conflicting with the "public and security interest of the state" (Article 22). This condition raises concerns of ambiguity and

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<sup>25</sup> SMEX. (2023, September 13). UAE's Data Protection Law: Between Exceptions and Exemptions. Retrieved from <https://smex.org/uaes-data-protection-law-between-exceptions-and-exemptions/>.

potential misuse due to the lack of explicit criteria. Additionally, the law mandates that data classified as "confidential, sensitive, and classified" must be stored in the UAE.<sup>26</sup> However, the law fails to provide a clear definition of sensitive or classified data, granting authorities broad control over the data of journalists, media entities, and all individuals.

- b) ***Surveillance of Communications***: In a troubling development, voice communications are not the only target of monitoring in the Emirates. The country's Internet service providers, Etisalat and Du, go a step further by blocking the majority, if not all, of Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP) services. This includes the blocking of calling features within popular social networking platforms such as Facebook, WhatsApp, Snapchat, and Skype. These measures are implemented due to the complexity involved in monitoring communications through these platforms, further exacerbating concerns about invasive surveillance practices. In an attempt to evade criticism, the Emirates Telecommunications Corporation introduced a free communication app called ToTok, actively promoting it through official channels.<sup>27</sup> However, subsequent investigations exposed the UAE's exploitation of the app as a surveillance tool. Users' phone data was being stolen, their locations tracked, and their conversations, both audio and video, were being spied upon. Additionally, the app was granted access to the phone's microphone and camera.<sup>28</sup> Following the revelations, Apple and Google removed ToTok from their app stores. It is worth noting that the app is reportedly owned by the 42 Group, which is affiliated with Sheikh Tahnoun bin Zayed Al Nahyan, the National Security Advisor, Head of the Intelligence Service, and Vice President of the Emirates, along with his brother.<sup>29</sup>
- c) ***Criminalizing Evasion of Surveillance***: Both male and female journalists employ various methods to bypass censorship or access prohibited reports and information on the internet. One common approach to bypass internet censorship is by utilizing VPN services. In the UAE, however, doing so is considered a criminal offense. According to

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<sup>26</sup> Freedom House, Freedom on the Net 2022: United Arab Emirates, [online] Available: [https://freedomhouse.org/country/united-arab-emirates/freedom-net/2022#footnote5\\_5u8io6n](https://freedomhouse.org/country/united-arab-emirates/freedom-net/2022#footnote5_5u8io6n).

<sup>27</sup> The prevalence of the "ToTok" app, [online] Available: <https://tinyurl.com/2bqamxc9>

<sup>28</sup> Mark Mazzetti, Nicole Perloth, and Ronen Bergman, "It Seemed Like a Popular Chat App. It's Secretly a Spy Tool," The New York Times, December 22, 2019, accessed September 16, 2023, [online] Available: <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/12/22/us/politics/totok-app-uae.html>.

<sup>29</sup> Bill Marczak, "A BREEJ TOO FAR: How Abu Dhabi's Spy Sheikh hid his Chat App in Plain Sight," Medium, [online] Available: <https://tinyurl.com/wb23e2e>.

Article (10) of the Law on Combating Rumors and Cybercrimes, individuals who circumvent the protocol address of the information network using a third-party address or any other means, with the intention of committing a crime or impeding its detection, may face imprisonment and a fine of up to two million dirhams (\$500,000), or one of these two penalties.<sup>30</sup>

- d) ***Direct Surveillance***. In addition to monitoring male and female journalists within its borders, the UAE goes a step further by employing spyware to violate their privacy. The country has been identified as a known customer of NSO, an Israeli company. Abu Dhabi utilizes advanced surveillance techniques like remote monitoring without the need for the target to click on a link or file. This technology poses a significant risk to any device, as it can be exploited without the target's action.<sup>31</sup> The first instances of such targeting emerged in **2016** when human rights activist Ahmed Mansour and other journalists had their phones compromised, as revealed by Citizen Lab, based in Canada.<sup>32</sup> Further investigations and leaked documents in **2018** confirmed that the UAE government had been utilizing the Pegasus spy program since at least **2017**, targeting male and female journalists both inside and outside the country.<sup>33</sup>

The UAE government enlisted scores of foreign individuals and operatives to carry out surveillance on journalists and individuals who expressed criticism towards its regime.<sup>34</sup> In **2018**, it was disclosed that the UAE had enlisted a significant number of foreign agents and experts to monitor both male and female journalists, bloggers, and other dissenting voices. A Reuters investigation in early **2019** further exposed the UAE's utilization of numerous American digital agents in a covert operation known as Raven, aimed at spying on journalists and politicians.<sup>35</sup> Subsequently, in July **2021**, additional evidence surfaced, providing further confirmation that Abu Dhabi had engaged in

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<sup>30</sup> Anti-Rumor and Cybercrime Law, Ministry of Justice, United Arab Emirates, [online] Available: <https://tinyurl.com/24xbe53l>.

<sup>31</sup> What is 'G42'? How does Sheikh Tahnoun use it to extend his influence in the country." UAE71, [online] Available: <https://uae71.com/posts/99928>.

<sup>32</sup> Citizen Lab, "Keep Calm and (Don't) Enable Macros: A New Threat Actor Targets UAE Dissidents," May 10, 2016, [online] Available: <https://citizenlab.ca/2016/05/stealth-falcon/>.

<sup>33</sup> Freedom House. "Freedom on the Net 2022: United Arab Emirates, [online] Available: <https://freedomhouse.org/country/united-arab-emirates/freedom-net/2022>.

<sup>34</sup> Skyline. (2023, July 20). "The UAE Has Recruited Foreign Experts and Hackers to Spy on Its Citizens." EMASC UAE. Retrieved from <https://www.emasc-uae.com/news/view/13454>.

<sup>35</sup> Reuters, "Special Report: Inside the UAE's secret hacking team of U.S. mercenaries," Reuters, September 11, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-spying-raven-specialreport-idUSKCN1PO190>.

extensive surveillance activities targeting a large number of journalists, regardless of gender.<sup>36</sup>

Numerous instances of surveillance were uncovered, including the spying on 36 journalists and media personnel affiliated with Al Jazeera.<sup>37</sup> Notable figures targeted included Jamal Khashoggi, the Saudi journalist who was tragically assassinated in Istanbul's Saudi embassy in **2018**, along with individuals closely associated with him such as his wife Hanan Al-Atar, Wadah Khanfar (former director of Al Jazeera), and Yassin Aktay (a close advisor to Erdogan). Additionally, the Emirates engaged in surveillance on foreign journalists, both male and female, within the country. Some of the targeted individuals were Ahmed Mansour and the late Alaa Al-Siddiq, a researcher, human rights activist, and political commentator who passed away in a traffic accident while in exile in the United Kingdom. Among the foreign journalists monitored were Simon Kerr of the Financial Times, Greg Karstrom, a correspondent for "The Economist," Caroline Towse, Director of Operations at CNN Dubai, and Bradley Hope, a prominent American journalist based in London, covering financial matters for the Wall Street Journal (WSJ).<sup>38</sup>

In September **2021**, three ex-intelligence personnel from the United States were fined a total of \$1.7 million and faced accusations of supplying hacking software to the authorities in the United Arab Emirates (UAE). The provided software was allegedly employed to target journalists and individuals critical of the government.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> The Guardian, "FT editor among 180 journalists identified by clients of spyware firm (an article about the use of spyware by government clients to target journalists)," The Guardian, July 18, 2021, retrieved from <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/jul/18/ft-editor-roula-khalaf-among-180-journalists-targeted-nso-spyware>.

<sup>37</sup> Citizen Lab. (2020, December 21). Journalists hacked with suspected NSO Group iMessage "zero-click" exploit. [online] Available at: <https://citizenlab.ca/2020/12/the-great-ipwn-journalists-hacked-with-suspected-nso-group-imeessage-zero-click-exploit>.

<sup>38</sup> Daraj Media. (2023, July 19). UAE: Israel's (Pegasus) Spyware in the Service of Autocracy. [online] Available at: <https://daraj.media/en/76524/>.

<sup>39</sup> Reuters. (2021, April 2). 3 Former U.S. Intelligence Operatives Admit Hacking For United Arab Emirates. [online] Available at: <https://www.reuters.com/investigates/special-report/usa-spying-raven/>.

## Foreign Reporters

Foreign journalists working in a particular country like the UAE face a different form of intimidation compared to citizen journalists. These foreign journalists, both male and female, often experience threats of arbitrary dismissal and deportation by the authorities.

Journalists, particularly those from foreign backgrounds working in the UAE, have raised concerns about censorship imposed by their editors, particularly when covering sensitive topics such as religion, politics, or the UAE's relationships with foreign allies. Foreign media outlets operating within free zones generally enjoy a certain degree of editorial freedom, although some journalists have received unspecified threats regarding their reporting.<sup>40</sup>

In the annual report for **2022**, two journalists employed by an English-language Emirati newspaper provided testimony to "Women Journalists Without Chains." They revealed that they had received warning phone calls from the government, which included explicit threats of immediate arrest or deportation. These threats were in response to their coverage of topics related to "education and value-added tax." Furthermore, they were subjected to internal investigations initiated by the newspaper itself. Additionally, four other journalists working for local government newspapers disclosed that their colleagues had been intermittently investigated throughout the year.

Individuals who criticize the UAE from outside the country also encounter various violations. A notable example is Andrew Ross, a professor at New York University, who was denied entry into the UAE, where the university maintains a campus. This action was taken against him after he expressed criticism regarding the treatment of workers involved in the construction of the campus.

## Conclusion

Journalism and media organizations are entrusted with special rights and responsibilities in upholding freedom of the press. These rights are essential for journalists, both male and female, to fulfill their role of monitoring and informing the public on matters of public interest, while also fostering national discourse and engagement. However, an examination of the press landscape in the UAE suggests that it is predominantly wielded as a political tool by the authorities, serving

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<sup>40</sup> Refworld. (2017, May 26). Freedom of the Press 2017 - United Arab Emirates. [online] Available at: <https://www.refworld.org/docid/59fc67b4a.html>.

as a means to disseminate propaganda and influence the population, including both citizens and residents of the Gulf state. The authorities exert regulatory control over the press, dictating its structural framework and determining the establishment of newspapers. Ownership and establishment of media outlets are tightly controlled, resulting in a concentration of power in the hands of the ruling regime, leading to a dominance of government-affiliated or government-controlled local media.

The government exercises strict control over both male and female journalists, which is closely tied to organizational control. This control is aimed at ensuring that the press is operated by individuals who align with the government's policies and plans. As a result, obtaining security approval is a prerequisite for employing any journalist within the country, and this approval must be renewed annually.

The fact that a significant number of press workers are non-citizens plays a role in this dynamic. Non-citizen journalists, both male and female, face the constant threat of imprisonment and deportation for even the slightest mistakes, even if they are unintentional. Moreover, expatriate journalists, who are typically better compensated, have limited incentive to take on the risks associated with critical or investigative journalism. This combination of control measures and potential consequences creates a climate where self-censorship and lack of journalistic independence are prevalent.

In the UAE, the authorities tightly control the media by providing explicit guidelines and instructions, ensuring strict compliance. However, this control hinders independent journalism, despite claims of progressiveness and openness. Emiratis should approach official narratives with caution, knowing that conflicting perspectives are often dismissed as false. It is vital to remember that the essence of journalism lies in seeking the truth. When journalists fulfill this role, they empower citizens as the ultimate authority.<sup>41</sup> Regardless of challenges and limitations, Emiratis and individuals everywhere should value and uphold the pursuit of truth.

The UAE authorities go beyond simply outlawing and criminalizing a free press; they have employed technology in intricate ways to monitor journalists and bloggers, both male and female, on the internet. Their aim is to suppress any publication of facts that they deem unfit for

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<sup>41</sup> Press Herald. (2018, August 16). Our View: The best defense against tyranny is a free and independent press. [online] Available at: <https://www.pressherald.com/2018/08/16/our-view-the-best-defense-against-tyranny-is-a-free-and-independent-press/>.

public consumption. In the face of such control, an independent press in the Emirates becomes essential to ensure that people's freedom to access and share information remains unaltered and untainted by the agendas of authorities, entities, or groups.

The role of the press extends far beyond serving as a mouthpiece for those in power. Its mission is to scrutinize the actions of the authority, including its governance, decisions, and laws, fearlessly asking important questions regardless of the potential political and personal consequences for officials. The existence of an independent press is a testament to the presence of a "free society." Without it, individuals find themselves trapped in a vast prison governed by an oppressive ruling elite.

### Recommendations

#### To President Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahyan of the UAE:

1. Promptly and unconditionally release all incarcerated journalists, both male and female, and prisoners of conscience.
2. Prioritize the well-being and reunification of the released individuals and their families.
3. End the practice of silencing dissenting voices.
4. Guarantee freedom from censorship for journalists, regardless of gender, enabling them to carry out their work without interference.

#### To the government:

1. Urgently revoke the notorious laws that unjustly target the free press, limiting the vital work of journalists, regardless of their gender.
2. Cease the oppressive grip of regulatory and editorial censorship that stifles media outlets and journalists, and instead foster an environment where open discussions on public affairs can thrive. Enact laws that protect journalistic sources and prohibit their unwarranted disclosure.
3. Dismantle the pervasive surveillance apparatus imposed on the internet, liberating male and female journalists from constant tracking and the invasive spying on their personal devices.
4. Embrace the empowerment of journalists by allowing them to establish unions and independent organizations, acting as guardians to protect their rights and champion the

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challenges faced by the journalistic community, and in doing so, nurture a climate that upholds a free and independent press.