



Women  
Journalists  
Without  
Chains

# Counterterrorism or Dissent Suppression? A Critical Look at The UAE's Legal Framework







## Introduction

Counterterrorism legislation plays a vital role in protecting national security and preventing acts of violence. However, the effectiveness of such laws must be judged not only by their ability to deter terrorist threats, but also by their consistency with international human rights standards and the protection of civil liberties. Striking a balance between security and freedom is a global challenge—one that demands ongoing scrutiny to prevent these laws from being misused as instruments of political repression.



In 2014, the United Arab Emirates enacted a new counterterrorism law, expanding its already robust security framework. While Emirati authorities maintain that the legislation is necessary to preserve stability in a turbulent regional and global context, the law has triggered alarm among human rights groups and international legal experts. Key concerns include the law's vague and overly broad definitions of terrorism, the sweeping powers it grants to security agencies, and its potential to curtail freedom of expression, peaceful assembly, and the right to a fair trial.

More troublingly, evidence suggests that the law has been used to target political opponents, dissidents, and even their family members—raising serious questions about whether the UAE's counterterrorism apparatus serves national security or functions as a tool to silence dissent. This report critically examines the UAE's



counterterrorism law, analyzing its provisions in light of international human rights obligations. It assesses the law's impact on civic space, political expression, and due process, and offers recommendations for legislative reform and international engagement to safeguard fundamental freedoms under the guise of counterterrorism.

### **Methodology:**

This report employs a critical, analytical methodology to evaluate the United Arab Emirates' counterterrorism law and its implications for human rights. The approach aims to ensure an objective and well-informed assessment grounded in legal analysis, international standards, and documented cases of implementation. The methodology consists of five core components:

1. **Legal Framework Analysis:** An in-depth examination of the UAE's 2014 counterterrorism law forms the foundation of this study. Particular attention is paid to key definitions—such as "terrorism" and "terrorist organization"—as well as the scope of authority granted to executive and judicial bodies and the severity of penalties. The legal provisions are compared to international best practices and global norms relating to counterterrorism and human rights protections.
2. **Review of Human Rights Reports and UN Documentation:** The report reviews findings and analyses from international and regional human rights organizations, alongside documentation produced by relevant UN bodies and Special Procedures. These sources help to identify systemic concerns regarding the law's implementation and provide a broader context of its human rights impact.
3. **Assessment of Human Rights Implications:** The analysis focuses on how the law affects key rights and freedoms, including freedom of expression, association, privacy, and the right to a fair trial. Special consideration is given to the consequences of vague legal definitions and insufficient legal safeguards, particularly regarding the suppression of peaceful dissent or criticism of the authorities.





4. **Case Studies:** Selected case studies are used to illustrate how the law is applied in practice. These are based on available documentation and, where feasible, direct accounts from individuals or families affected by the law—particularly those placed on terrorist lists or prosecuted for non-violent political expression. Care has been taken to avoid endangering the safety or privacy of any individuals involved.
5. **Comparison with International Human Rights Standards:** The UAE's counterterrorism law is assessed in light of the country's international human rights obligations. While the UAE is not a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), the covenant serves as a widely accepted benchmark. The report also references the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the Convention against Torture, and other applicable instruments.

### Limitations

Access to independent and verifiable information in the UAE remains highly restricted. This poses challenges to the depth and comprehensiveness of certain findings. Nonetheless, the report relies on the most credible and accessible sources available and prioritizes accuracy, objectivity, and the protection of those affected by state actions.





## I. The Legal Framework of the UAE's Counterterrorism Law

### A. Historical Context and Legislative Evolution

The UAE's current counterterrorism law is the product of a gradual legal evolution shaped by both domestic policy shifts and international developments. Rather than being a singular legislative act, it represents the culmination of successive laws and amendments that reflect the state's changing perception of terrorism and its strategic priorities since its founding in 1971.

### Early Legislation and Legal Foundations

The UAE's legislative focus on counterterrorism intensified in the aftermath of the September 11, 2001 attacks, in line with broader global trends. Although the country has not experienced the same scale of terrorist violence as some of its regional neighbors, it moved proactively to strengthen its legal infrastructure—particularly in areas tied to financial flows, given its role as a major regional financial hub. Key legislative milestones include:

#### **a. Federal Law No. 4 of 2002 on the Criminalization of Money Laundering:**

While not explicitly a counterterrorism law, this legislation marked a foundational step in addressing the financing of illicit activities, including terrorism. It has since been amended multiple times to improve compliance with international standards.

#### **b. Federal Law No. 1 of 2004 on Combating Terrorist Crimes:**

This law introduced comprehensive provisions criminalizing acts of terrorism and set forth penalties for those involved. It also laid the groundwork for cooperation with other states and international organizations in addressing transnational threats.

#### **c. Supplementary Laws and Executive Regulations:**

Over the following years, the UAE expanded its legal framework to include a range of Cabinet decisions and regulatory directives, particularly targeting money laundering and terrorist financing. These measures sought to align the country's practices with the recommendations of the Financial Action Task Force (FATF) and the United Nations Security Council.





## Drivers Behind the 2014 Legislation

The enactment of the UAE's 2014 counterterrorism law did not occur in a vacuum. It was influenced by a confluence of regional instability, international counterterrorism expectations, and the UAE's own strategic recalibration. These dynamics contributed to the state's decision to adopt a more expansive and stringent legislative framework. Several key factors shaped the law's formulation and timing:

### Political Reform Demands and the Arab Spring:

The law was introduced three years after the 2011 Arab uprisings, which had sparked rare calls for political reform within the UAE. In response, the state launched a wide-reaching crackdown on dissidents—particularly targeting members of Islamist groups, most notably the Muslim Brotherhood, but also liberal reformists. This period marked a turning point in the UAE's domestic policy and foreign posture, with Abu Dhabi adopting a more overtly hostile stance toward political Islam, both at home and abroad. The counterterrorism law can thus be seen as a legal instrument reinforcing this political shift.

### Escalating Regional and Global Threats:

The early 2010s witnessed the rise of extremist organizations such as ISIS, the proliferation of armed non-state actors, and the growing phenomenon of foreign fighters. At the same time, terrorist networks increasingly relied on digital platforms for recruitment and propaganda. These developments heightened regional instability and fueled global demands for stronger counterterrorism measures. The UAE sought to position itself as a proactive partner in these efforts, which provided further justification for tightening its domestic security laws.

### International Legal Commitments:

As a member of the United Nations and a signatory to several international agreements on counterterrorism, the UAE is formally obligated to implement relevant Security Council resolutions, including those addressing terrorist financing and transnational threats. The 2014 law was presented as part of the state's effort to comply with such commitments and align its national



legislation with international norms—particularly the requirements set by the Financial Action Task Force (FATF).

### **Technological Shifts in Terrorism Tactics:**

Emirati authorities have pointed to the evolution of terrorist methods, especially the use of social media, encrypted communications, and digital financial tools, as a rationale for enhancing legal powers. The argument is that traditional laws were no longer sufficient to keep pace with the sophistication and reach of terrorist groups operating in cyberspace.

### **The Security–Stability Paradigm:**

The UAE's leadership frequently emphasizes internal security as the cornerstone of national development and prosperity. Within this framework, the 2014 law was introduced as a safeguard—purportedly designed to protect the country's social fabric and shield it from emerging threats. The narrative presented to the public framed the law as a necessary and preventive measure in an increasingly volatile region.

However, while the UAE justified the legislation as a response to evolving security challenges, the law has drawn widespread criticism for its vague language and sweeping provisions. In practice, it has provided the state with legal cover to suppress peaceful dissent, prosecute political activists, and target the families of those critical of the government.

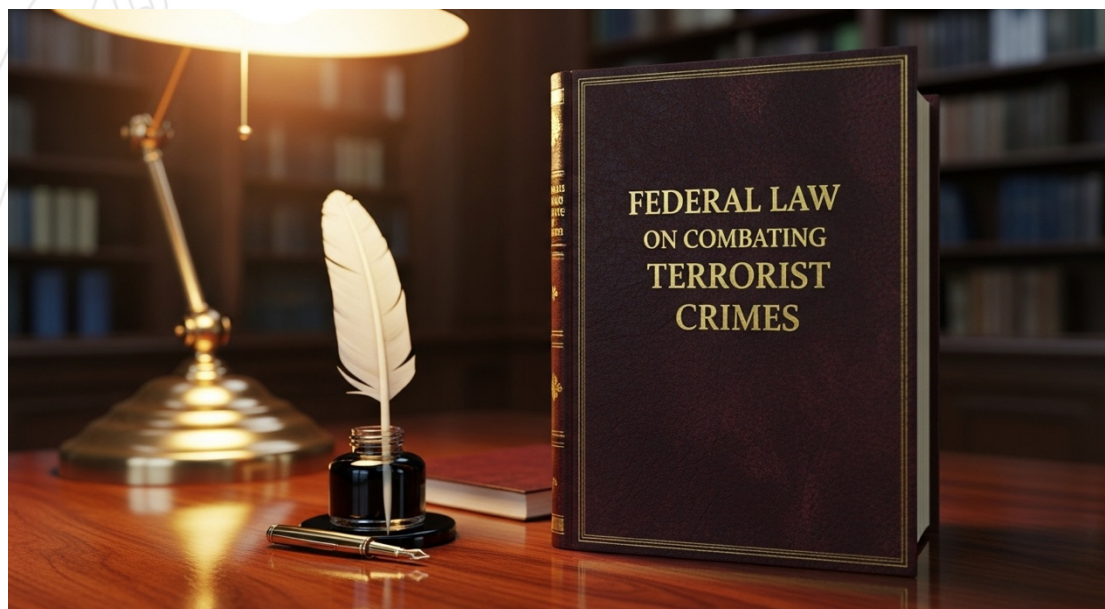
## **B. Analysis of Federal Law No. 7 of 2014 on Combating Terrorist Crimes**

Federal Law No. 7 of 2014 represents the UAE's most comprehensive legal instrument addressing terrorism-related offenses. While the legislation is framed as a means to bolster national security and enhance the state's capacity to prevent





terrorist threats, several of its provisions—particularly those relating to definitions and discretionary powers—raise significant human rights concerns.



### 1. Vague and Overbroad Definitions

The clarity and precision of legal definitions in counterterrorism legislation are essential to prevent misuse and ensure compliance with international legal standards. In particular, the principle of legality under international human rights law requires that criminal laws define offenses clearly and narrowly, to avoid arbitrary or abusive application. Unfortunately, the UAE's 2014 law falls short in this regard.

- **Definition of "Terrorism" and "Terrorist Outcome":** Article 1 of the law offers a sweeping and imprecise definition of what constitutes a "terrorist outcome." It includes acts such as "stirring up terror among a group of people," "influencing public authorities," "disrupting internal or international security," and "antagonizing the state." These phrases are overly broad and lack the specificity needed to distinguish between genuine acts of terrorism and legitimate expressions of dissent or political opposition. Unlike definitions grounded in international conventions—which typically center on acts of serious violence against civilians or unlawful threats intended to cause fear or coercion—this law extends the scope of terrorism to include non-violent conduct. For example, actions aimed at "influencing the public authorities" or



"obtaining a benefit from the state or an international organization" could conceivably encompass peaceful protest, political speech, or engagement with international human rights bodies. Such ambiguity opens the door to arbitrary interpretation by security and judicial authorities. It also runs counter to the guidance of UN special rapporteurs and international human rights bodies, which emphasize that counterterrorism laws must not be used as tools to suppress freedom of expression, association, or peaceful political activity.



- **Definitions of "Terrorist Organizations and Groups"**

Federal Law No. (7) of 2014 concerning the Combating of Terrorist Crimes in the United Arab Emirates introduces expansive definitions of "terrorist organizations" and "terrorist groups" that raise serious legal and human rights concerns, particularly in relation to the rights to freedom of association, expression, and peaceful assembly. Under Article (1) of the law, a "terrorist organization" is defined as any group of two or more persons that has committed, participated in, facilitated, incited, or merely planned or sought to commit a terrorist crime—regardless of its name, form, location, or the nationality of its members. This sweeping formulation encompasses not only those who directly engage in or support acts of terrorism, but also those who





may simply advocate, express intention, or be accused of aiming or promoting the commission of such acts. The definitional scope of "a group of two or more persons" is particularly problematic. It allows for the classification of any informal or formal gathering—however peaceful—as a terrorist organization if the authorities associate it, however tenuously, with a "terrorist crime." When considered in light of the law's expansive definition of a "terrorist outcome," which includes vague terms such as "hostility to the state" or efforts to "influence government policy," this opens the door to conflating peaceful political opposition, criticism of government practices, or civil advocacy with terrorism. Equally concerning is the law's criminalization of intentions and associations based on subjective assessments. Terms such as "aiming to commit," "planning," or "striving to commit" a terrorist act are legally ambiguous and invite arbitrary enforcement. In the absence of clear legal thresholds or evidentiary standards, individuals and groups may be penalized not for actual conduct, but for perceived intentions or ideological positions. This definitional vagueness creates a legal framework in which legitimate civil society actors—including human rights organizations, political reform advocates, or groups critical of state policies—can be designated as terrorist entities. The law does not distinguish between violent and non-violent actors, nor does it provide sufficient safeguards against misuse by authorities. As a result, peaceful associations have been dissolved, activists prosecuted, and political dissent effectively suppressed under the guise of counter-terrorism. In practice, the application of this law has led to the criminalization of civil society organizations operating both within and outside the UAE. Entities that have engaged in peaceful advocacy or exercised legitimate rights under international law have been labeled as terrorist, solely on the basis that their objectives or criticisms are perceived to be at odds with the government's political agenda.

- **The Definition of a "Terrorist Person"**

The law defines a "terrorist person" using broad and vague terms similar to those applied to "terrorist organizations." Under this framework, any individual may be designated a terrorist if they belong to a terrorist



organization, commit a terrorist crime, or even if they merely aim to commit, plan, promote, or incite such crimes—whether directly or indirectly. This definition raises serious legal and human rights concerns. First, it is directly tethered to the problematic definition of "terrorist organization," which—as previously analyzed—includes entities that may engage solely in peaceful or dissenting activity. As a result, the law permits the classification of an individual as a "terrorist person" based solely on their membership in a group that the government has designated as terrorist, even if that group's activities are entirely non-violent.



Such a provision undermines the right to freedom of association, a cornerstone of international human rights law, by exposing individuals to severe criminal liability without the need to prove intent or participation in any violent or criminal conduct. Further compounding this issue is the law's reference to individuals who "threaten," "aim," "plan," or "seek" to commit terrorist crimes—formulations so vague that they could encompass expressions of opinion, political advocacy, or even the exercise of conscience. When read in conjunction with the law's broad conceptualization of a "terrorist crime"—which may include actions construed as hostile to the state or seeking to influence public authorities—the definition of a "terrorist person" becomes dangerously elastic.

Of particular concern is the inclusion of indirect forms of participation, such as incitement or promotion. Article 34 of the law imposes life imprisonment and fines of up to four million dirhams on any individual who promotes or





endorses a terrorist organization, person, or act "verbally, in writing, or by any other means." This includes electronic and online expressions, such as social media posts. Such provisions risk criminalizing forms of expression that do not constitute incitement to violence but may merely reflect dissenting political views, critical commentary, or the sharing of controversial content.

The breadth of Article 34 effectively transforms the expression of opinion—particularly in digital spaces—into a potential criminal offense, thereby infringing upon the right to freedom of expression. The lack of clear distinctions between advocacy, commentary, and incitement erodes the principle of legality, which requires that criminal laws be sufficiently clear, precise, and foreseeable in their application. Moreover, these provisions enable the prosecution of individuals not for their actions, but for their presumed affiliations, beliefs, or intentions. In doing so, the law undermines the presumption of innocence and the right to a fair trial, as individuals may face harsh penalties based on assumptions about their associations rather than demonstrable criminal conduct.

This stands in clear violation of international legal standards, including those set out in the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. In practice, the application of these provisions has contributed to the narrowing of civic space within the UAE. Human rights defenders, political activists, journalists, and online commentators have faced arrest, prosecution, and prolonged detention under the guise of counter-terrorism—often without credible evidence of involvement in violent activities. The mere act of expressing critical opinions or affiliating with reformist organizations has, in some cases, led to individuals being labeled as terrorist actors.

- **Membership and Financing**

Article 22(1) of Federal Law No. (7) of 2014 criminalizes any individual who "seeks to join or associate with a terrorist organization or participates in its activities in any way, knowing its truth or purpose." Articles 21 and 22 address the formation, leadership, and participation in what the law defines as a "terrorist group." Given the broad and ambiguous definition of "terrorist organization"—which includes groups that merely "threaten" or "aim" to



commit a terrorist offense—these provisions risk encompassing civil society organizations or political associations engaged in lawful activity.



Such breadth infringes on the right to freedom of association as protected under Article 20 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and Article 22 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. Individuals may face criminal penalties solely for their affiliation with groups designated as "terrorist," without any requirement of actual involvement in violence.

Articles 29 and 30, addressing the financing of terrorism, and Articles 31 and 32, covering material support and assistance, are important components of counter-terrorism frameworks. However, when combined with vague definitions of "terrorist organization" and "terrorist person," these provisions risk criminalizing individuals who provide humanitarian aid or other forms of support to groups broadly and arbitrarily labeled as terrorist—regardless of intent or connection to actual violence. The lack of precision in legal definitions creates the danger of penalizing legitimate charitable or public service activities.

Taken together, these provisions grant overly broad discretion to the authorities, enabling the criminalization of conduct that does not present a genuine terrorist threat. This ambiguity endangers the rights to freedom of



expression, association, and peaceful assembly, as the law may be used to suppress dissent or criticism deemed by the state as threatening, disruptive, or influential over authority. The vague and open-ended language undermines legal certainty, a core tenet of the rule of law enshrined in Article 11 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which requires that criminal laws be sufficiently clear so that individuals can know what constitutes a criminal offense and the consequences that follow.

- **Targeting Critics Abroad**

The law aims to include opponents or critics of the state abroad, whether they are citizens or non-citizens, by defining acts as offenses committed "with the intention of influencing the state or compelling it to act or refrain from acting" (Article 2/b). It criminalizes communication with individuals or entities on terrorism lists, including political opponents whose families and tribes remain in the state: "Anyone who seeks assistance from a foreign state, a terrorist organization, or a terrorist person, or anyone working for their benefit, as well as anyone who communicates with any of them" (Article 29/1).





Table (1): Key Definitions in the Federal Law of the United Arab Emirates No. (7) of 2014

Term	Definition (according to Federal Law No. 7 of 2014)	Potential for Broad Interpretation/Misuse
Terrorist Purpose	The intention of the perpetrator to commit an illegal act or refrain from an act to achieve a "terrorist outcome," or their awareness of the possibility of such an outcome.	The definition focuses on intent and awareness of potential outcomes of any "illegal" act, allowing authorities wide discretion in linking terrorist intent to any potential act, even if far removed from direct violence.
Terrorist Outcome	Any act aimed at frightening people, causing them harm, undermining community security, or "anti-state" actions, or "influencing public authorities."	Terms like "anti-state" or "influencing public authorities" are extremely vague and can be interpreted to include legitimate activities such as peaceful protests or political criticism, broadening the scope of terrorism to encompass non-violent actions.
Terrorist Organization	A group of two or more persons "committing, participating in, threatening, intending, promoting, or inciting" the commission of a terrorist crime.	This definition allows any group, even if not inherently violent, to be classified as a terrorist organization, which could target legitimate civil society organizations or political groups if their activities are interpreted as "promoting" a broadly defined "terrorist outcome."
Terrorist	Any person belonging to a terrorist organization, participating in a terrorist crime, promoting it, or inciting it.	This definition links individual responsibility to membership in a loosely defined "terrorist organization" or "terrorist crime," potentially exposing individuals to criminal liability even if their involvement is non-violent or limited to expressing opinions.
Dangerous Terrorist Terrorist Threat	A person who adopts "extremist or terrorist beliefs with the expectation of committing a terrorist crime."	The definition lacks clarity in identifying "extremist beliefs" and "expectation of committing a crime," allowing for preventive detention based on beliefs and opinions without evidence of concrete action, violating the principle of presumption of innocence.
Promoting Terrorist Activities	"Promoting or advocating by speech, writing, or any other means for any terrorist organization, terrorist person, or terrorist crime."	media, if interpreted as "promoting" or "advocating," leading to widespread self-censorship on freedom of expression.



## 2. Powers Granted to Authorities

Federal Law No. (7) of 2014 concerning the Combating of Terrorist Crimes in the United Arab Emirates confers sweeping powers upon executive, security, and judicial bodies. While framed within the context of national security, these powers raise substantial concerns about potential overreach, due process deficiencies, and the absence of effective oversight mechanisms.

- **Designation of Individuals and Entities as Terrorists:** One of the most far-reaching provisions of the law is the authority granted to the Cabinet—the state's highest executive body—to designate individuals and entities as terrorists. Article 63(1) authorizes the Cabinet, upon the recommendation of the Minister of Presidential Affairs, to issue decisions establishing lists of terrorist organizations or persons deemed to pose a threat to the state or falling within international obligations. Since the law's enactment, the designation process has operated with minimal transparency. There is no publicly defined standard or procedural mechanism by which affected individuals or organizations are informed of the reasons behind their designation, nor are they guaranteed an opportunity to contest or appeal such decisions in a meaningful way. As a result, the designations can have far-reaching consequences—damaging reputations, restricting travel, limiting financial access, and severing social and familial ties. These effects extend beyond the country's borders, impacting Emiratis and others abroad whose communications or financial transactions may become subject to scrutiny or restriction solely based on association with a listed individual or group.
- **Arrest, Detention, and Investigative Powers:** While the counterterrorism law itself does not explicitly detail arrest and detention procedures, Article 43 classifies all offenses under the law as crimes that threaten the internal and external security of the state. Consequently, jurisdiction over such crimes falls to the State Security Apparatus under separate legislation, including the State Security Apparatus Law. This framework enables security forces—primarily intelligence agencies—to arrest and detain individuals on terrorism-



related grounds with limited judicial oversight, particularly during the initial stages of detention. Extended pre-trial detention is permitted, often without timely access to legal counsel or judicial review. This increases the risk of arbitrary detention, coerced confessions, and other forms of ill-treatment. Furthermore, the law grants broad investigatory powers, including search and seizure, which may be conducted without sufficient safeguards to ensure respect for the right to privacy or professional confidentiality—particularly for lawyers, journalists, and healthcare providers.

- **Asset Freezing and Property Confiscation:** The law also authorizes authorities to freeze and confiscate financial assets and property belonging to individuals or entities designated as terrorists or suspected of financing terrorism. However, these measures are often implemented without transparent procedures or access to legal remedies. There is no guaranteed right for affected individuals to challenge the basis of the freezing order, to present evidence in their defense, or to seek redress if the designation is later proven to be unfounded. The lack of procedural safeguards leaves individuals vulnerable to arbitrary financial sanctions, with direct repercussions for their families and business interests.
- **Surveillance and Monitoring of Communications:** Although Federal Law No. (7) of 2014 does not explicitly regulate surveillance powers, related legislation—particularly the State Security Apparatus Law, the Cybercrime Law, and social media regulations—provides the authorities with broad discretion to monitor electronic communications and public behavior. The UAE maintains a sophisticated surveillance infrastructure capable of monitoring both digital and physical activities, with little in the way of judicial control or public accountability. There is no requirement for prior judicial authorization for surveillance operations, nor are there obligations to notify individuals post-surveillance or to limit the duration and scope of monitoring. These expansive powers create a climate in which online expression, private communication, and public discourse can be subject to punitive action under the guise of counterterrorism. The absence of adequate legal safeguards





undermines the right to privacy and chills the exercise of free expression, particularly among journalists, activists, and political dissidents.

### 3. Penalties

Federal Law No. (7) of 2014 imposes severe criminal penalties for terrorism-related offenses, many of which are framed in overly broad and vague terms. This raises serious concerns about the proportionality of punishment, the right to a fair trial, and potential infringement on fundamental freedoms such as expression and association.

- **Harsh Criminal Penalties:** The law provides for life imprisonment and, in some cases, the death penalty for a wide array of acts deemed "terrorist crimes." These include not only violent offenses but also broadly defined acts such as "threatening social peace," "undermining state stability," or "seeking to overthrow the regime" (Articles 14 and 15). Article 34/A extends these punishments—including life imprisonment and fines of up to 4 million dirhams—to anyone who promotes or supports a terrorist organization or individual, even through verbal or written expression. This expansive language risks criminalizing peaceful speech or political activism under the guise of counterterrorism.
- **Counseling and Correctional Facilities:** The law allows the Public Prosecution to transfer individuals accused of holding "extremist ideology" to counseling or correctional centers, with no clear legal definition of what constitutes extremism. Such placements can occur post-sentence and may continue indefinitely. These facilities have been criticized by UN Special Rapporteurs as vehicles for arbitrary detention and prolonged deprivation of liberty, particularly for individuals with Islamist affiliations.
- **Financial Penalties:** Fines under the law are extraordinarily high. Article 42/A allows the imposition of fines up to 100 million dirhams on legal entities whose employees commit terrorist crimes in the entity's name or interest—even without the organization's knowledge. This raises significant due process concerns for corporate actors and civil society groups.



- **Additional Restrictions:** Beyond incarceration, the law grants the Public Prosecution discretion to impose travel bans, surveillance, residency restrictions, and prohibitions on association for those labeled as holding extremist views (Article 41/1). These measures may be enforced without a clear legal threshold or judicial review, compounding the risk of arbitrary enforcement.



### **Sanctions on Entities**

The law empowers authorities to dissolve organizations, impose heavy fines, and freeze or confiscate assets of entities designated as "terrorist." These sanctions can be applied without adequate procedural safeguards, often lacking transparency, judicial oversight, or the right to appeal. The absence of clear legal definitions and thresholds risks encompassing peaceful associations or non-violent activities under the terrorism label. Financial penalties may be imposed even in cases where no intent or knowledge is proven.

Such sweeping measures raise serious concerns about proportionality and potential misuse, particularly in targeting civil society, dissent, or humanitarian work. Under international law, counterterrorism sanctions must be necessary, proportionate, and clearly defined, with effective remedies to protect fundamental rights, including freedom of expression, association, and the right to a fair trial.



#### 4. Judicial Procedures

While the UAE maintains a formal judicial system, the handling of terrorism-related cases raises serious concerns regarding due process and fair trial guarantees. The State Security Chamber within the Abu Dhabi Appeals Court holds exclusive jurisdiction over such cases. However, its independence has been questioned by UN special rapporteurs, particularly in politically sensitive prosecutions. Defendants often face significant procedural barriers—limited access to evidence, restrictions on legal representation, and curtailed opportunities for meaningful appeal—undermining their right to an effective defense.



Judicial proceedings are frequently conducted in secrecy. Families may not be notified, and public scrutiny is largely absent. The criteria used by authorities to classify individuals or groups as terrorists remain vague and undisclosed, leaving room for arbitrary application. These practices contravene not only international human rights standards but also the Arab Charter on Human Rights, which the UAE ratified in **2008**. Violations include arbitrary detention, lack of prompt judicial review, denial of the right to counsel, and restrictions on freedom of expression and assembly.

The counterterrorism framework further enables preventive detention based on "extremist beliefs," without requiring evidence of criminal intent or conduct. Mass





trials and indefinite confinement in so-called rehabilitation centers have also been documented. Key human rights violations include the use of torture, denial of due process, criminalization of peaceful dissent, lack of privacy safeguards, and citizenship revocations targeting critics and their families. These issues point to a judicial process deeply influenced by executive authority and lacking the safeguards necessary to uphold the rule of law.

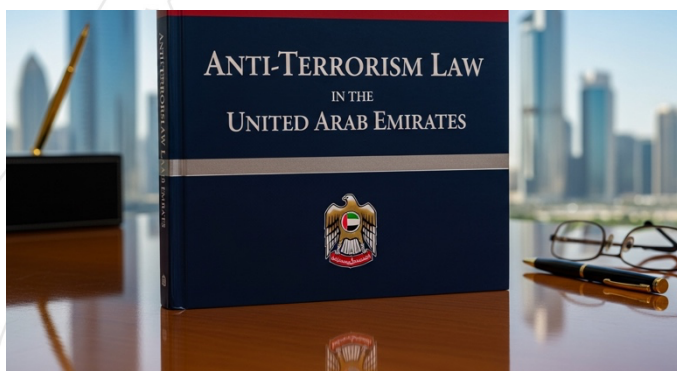


**Table 2: Recurring Concerns Regarding Human Rights Violations in UAE Federal Law No. (7) of 2014**

Main Concerns	Recurring Issues
<b>Vague and Ambiguous Definitions</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Terms like 'against the state' and 'influence on authorities' can include peaceful protest and criticism.</li><li>• Broad definitions allow peaceful individuals and organizations to be classified as terrorists.</li><li>• Preventive detention based on beliefs, not actions, violates presumption of innocence.</li></ul>
<b>Expanded Powers and Lack of Oversight</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Broad powers are granted to executive bodies and state security forces.</li><li>• Lack of independent oversight raises concerns about judicial independence.</li><li>• Cabinet listings of terrorists occur without judicial review or clear standards.</li></ul>
<b>Expanded Powers and Lack of Oversight</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Broad powers are granted to executive bodies and state security forces.</li><li>• Lack of independent oversight raises concerns about judicial independence.</li><li>• Cabinet listings of terrorists occur without judicial review or clear standards.</li></ul>
<b>Harsh Penalties</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Death or life sentences imposed for non-violent acts like expression or support.</li><li>• Fines can reach 4 million dirhams.</li><li>• These penalties deter legitimate expression and promote self-censorship.</li></ul>
<b>Specific Human Rights Violations</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Arbitrary detention, torture, and indefinite rehabilitation center confinement.</li><li>• Secret, unfair trials including mass trials with procedural violations.</li><li>• Criminalization of academic, journalistic, or critical activities.</li><li>• Spyware use and unauthorized surveillance.</li><li>• Citizenship revoked from naturalized critics and their relatives.</li></ul>
<b>Targeting Dissenters Abroad</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Dissenters abroad, their families, and businesses are blacklisted as terrorists, isolating and punishing them extraterritorially.</li></ul>



## II. Human Rights Implications of the UAE's Counterterrorism Law



While the UAE's counterterrorism law aims to address legitimate security concerns, it raises serious human rights issues due to its vague language and expansive scope. The law overlaps with other restrictive legislation,

including the Anti-Rumors and Cybercrime Law and the new Penal Code enacted in January 2023, creating a legal environment that risks criminalizing protected expression.

Key provisions broadly define terrorism-related offenses, including the use of the internet to "promote ideologies" or "incite public opinion," without clear legal thresholds. This allows authorities to interpret peaceful online speech, protest calls, or engagement with international human rights mechanisms—such as the United Nations—as criminal acts. Penalties for these offenses are severe and disproportionate.

Article 178 of the new Penal Code further undermines transparency by criminalizing the unauthorized sharing of government information, potentially deterring whistleblowers and restricting civic space. Such legislation contravenes the UAE's international obligations under instruments like the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), particularly with respect to freedom of expression, association, and access to information. The cumulative effect of these laws risks enabling the suppression of dissent under the guise of counterterrorism, eroding fundamental rights protected under international human rights law.

### A. Restricting Fundamental Freedoms

The UAE's counterterrorism law imposes serious restrictions on fundamental freedoms, particularly the right to freedom of expression, opinion, and peaceful assembly. While addressing national security threats is a legitimate objective, the





law's vague and overly broad provisions enable arbitrary enforcement that threatens internationally protected rights.

## 1. Freedom of Expression and Opinion

Key definitions such as "terrorist purpose" and "terrorist outcome" lack precision and are dangerously elastic, allowing authorities to interpret peaceful dissent, political criticism, or calls for reform as acts of terrorism. Terms like "spreading extremist ideology," "incitement," or "disturbing public order" are not clearly defined and can be applied to legitimate expression, including opposition to government policies or advocacy for reform. The law even targets interactions with international human rights mechanisms, including the United Nations.

In practice, this legal ambiguity has facilitated reprisals against individuals who report abuses. The cases of Maryam Al Balushi and Amina Al Abdouli, both of whom received extended sentences after sending audio recordings to UN Special Procedures describing torture in Emirati prisons, illustrate how the law is used to punish whistleblowers and silence victims.

### Several articles within the law present particular concern:

- Article 14 criminalizes acts that "threaten the stability of the state," "harm national unity," or "oppose fundamental principles." These terms are not legally defined and may be applied to peaceful protests, critical journalism, or labor strikes. The prohibition on "blocking a state institution," for example, could be used against workers engaging in lawful industrial action, even in private sectors.
- Article 15 outlaws "declaring hostility to the state or its regime, or disloyalty to its leaders by any means of public expression." This provision effectively bans peaceful criticism or political opposition, directly violating the right to freedom of expression under international human rights law. The criminalization of "disloyalty" and its accompanying prison penalties create a climate of fear and discourage civic participation.
- Article 34 imposes life imprisonment and heavy fines for "promoting" or "supporting" terrorist organizations. However, the definition of support is excessively broad and vague. Academic discussions, journalistic reporting,



or legal analyses that mention designated groups could be construed as "promotion," especially in the absence of a clear threshold of criminal intent. Even the "knowingly" requirement does not safeguard against misuse when intent is inferred from mere speech.

The imposition of life imprisonment and fines reaching AED 4 million under the UAE's counterterrorism law—particularly for vague offenses such as "promotion" or "encouragement"—raises serious concerns about proportionality. These terms are not clearly defined and may encompass non-violent expression, thus violating the principle of legality and the foundational notion that there can be no punishment without proven criminal intent.

Article 34(b) further criminalizes the mere possession of materials—whether written, printed, or recorded—or tools used for distribution, if authorities believe they were "intended" for dissemination. However, the law provides no clear criteria for establishing such intent. This ambiguity poses a grave threat to freedom of expression and access to information, potentially criminalizing journalists, researchers, or private individuals for materials held solely for professional or personal purposes.





The provision also extends to possession of "any means of printing, recording, or publicity" prepared for disseminating materials considered supportive or promotional of proscribed ideas. This language is so expansive that it effectively targets the tools of expression themselves, imposing a chilling effect on media outlets, academic institutions, and civil society organizations. In practice, individuals may feel compelled to self-censor, avoiding even the possession of research materials or opinion articles for fear of prosecution.

The severity of potential penalties under these provisions—life sentences for "promotion" or "support"—further entrenches this chilling effect. It deters public debate, independent journalism, and peaceful activism, thereby hollowing out the space for critical discourse.

Evidence suggests a deliberate and systematic effort by the UAE to suppress independent thought, particularly in digital spaces. Laws related to counterterrorism and cybercrime are increasingly used to criminalize legitimate reporting on human rights abuses, academic research, and online expression. This signals a broader authoritarian strategy, wherein legal instruments are used to exert total control over information flows.

By criminalizing broad and vaguely defined categories of speech, the UAE effectively dismantles the public sphere. The threat of disproportionate punishment silences dissent and makes meaningful civic engagement—whether online or offline—nearly impossible. Under the pretext of national security, the state has created an environment of pervasive fear, undermining fundamental freedoms and violating international human rights norms.

## **2. Freedom of Association & Peaceful Assembly**

The UAE's counterterrorism law grants authorities sweeping powers to designate organizations as "terrorist," without transparent criteria or due process. This broad authority puts independent civil society organizations, charities, and advocacy groups at risk of dissolution, asset freezes, and criminal prosecution—solely for engaging in peaceful, legitimate activities that diverge from state-approved narratives. As a result, the space for independent civic action is severely constrained.



Participation in peaceful assemblies is also endangered by the law's vague language. Under its broad definitions, even private or small-scale gatherings may be labeled "unlawful assemblies" or "incitement to hatred," especially if the individuals involved are arbitrarily linked to banned groups. Peaceful protest or expression of dissent may therefore be reclassified as "support for terrorism," exposing participants to criminal charges.

This framework enables the criminalization of peaceful civic participation and fosters a climate of fear and intimidation. A clear example is the prosecution of academic Dr. Nasser bin Ghaith, who was sentenced after expressing views critical of regional governments. The legal ambiguity surrounding peaceful expression and assembly effectively erodes core human rights protections and undermines public trust in the legal system.

### 3. The Right to Privacy

The UAE's legal framework grants authorities extensive, unchecked surveillance powers that infringe on the right to privacy. Law enforcement and security agencies can monitor electronic communications, intercept data, access personal devices, and surveil social media without judicial oversight or clear limitations on scope or duration.



Allegations of state-sponsored use of Pegasus spyware, including against the ex-wife of the UAE Prime Minister and her legal team, highlight the government's advanced surveillance capabilities and its willingness to target individuals beyond security threats. Such tools, ostensibly for counterterrorism, risk being used to monitor journalists, dissidents, and private citizens.

The Public Prosecutor is also empowered to access financial records—bank accounts, trusts, deposits, and transactions—without prior notice. This raises





serious concerns about due process, as these powers can be exercised on the basis of loosely defined suspicions. The absence of independent oversight and safeguards transforms surveillance into a tool of repression. The result is a pervasive environment of self-censorship, mistrust, and fear. Individuals must constantly weigh the risk of state scrutiny in their communications, research, or financial dealings—chilling expression and stifling legitimate activities.

#### **4. Legal Guarantees and Fair Trial Procedures**

Legal guarantees and fair trial procedures are fundamental to safeguarding individual rights against state power. However, these principles are often compromised by stringent counterterrorism laws, particularly the UAE's Law No. 7 of 2014 and its subsequent amendments in 2023.

##### **Arbitrary Detention and Unfair Trials**

The law permits lengthy periods of pretrial detention, including in counseling centers, without formal charges, allowing for indefinite extensions through judicial review. This has led to numerous cases of arbitrary detention and mistreatment. Many political detainees have been held for months or even years beyond their sentences, justified only by vague claims of "posing a terrorist threat."



During trials, defendants in terrorism cases frequently face restrictions on their ability to communicate with their lawyers, especially early in the investigation, which undermines their capacity to mount an effective defense. The law does not explicitly criminalize torture or coerced

confessions in cases related to terrorism or state security. Reports indicate that detainees have been subjected to torture or mistreatment as retaliation for their cooperation with the United Nations and international human rights organizations. The UAE has a troubling history of extracting confessions under duress. Any use of



such methods is a gross violation of human rights, necessitating legal provisions that render such confessions inadmissible in court.

Many terrorism trials occur in secrecy or are severely restricted in terms of public and media access. This lack of transparency undermines accountability and raises concerns about the fairness of judicial proceedings. The following case studies illustrate the application of Federal Law No. 7:

- a) **Case Studies: "UAE 94" and "UAE 84" Mass Trials:** UAE 94: In 2013, 69 dissidents were sentenced to prison following a mass trial related to their advocacy for democratic reforms. Many of these individuals continued to be detained past their sentences without legal justification, labeled as undergoing "counseling" under Articles 40 and 48 of the Anti-Terrorism Law. This extension of detention beyond the legally allowed period represents a serious violation of the right to liberty. Over a year later, these detainees were included in the "UAE 84" trial, one of the largest mass trials in the UAE's history. In January 2024, UN experts expressed grave concerns about the trial of 84 civil society members facing dubious terrorism charges linked to events from 2010 to 2011. The experts highlighted violations of the prohibition against double jeopardy and retroactive application of criminal law, as many defendants had already served sentences for the same acts. Allegations of serious violations of fair trial rights emerged, including restricted access to case materials, limited legal counsel, coerced confessions, and reports of ill-treatment. Ultimately, after trials and appeals, 67 individuals were sentenced to life imprisonment, while 10 received prison terms of 10 to 15 years. The charges and evidence presented in this politically motivated ruling mirrored those from the 2013 convictions. The UAE contended that the latest accusations were "fundamentally different" from those in 2013, which did not involve financing a terrorist organization. However, these alleged crimes occurred prior to the enactment of the 2014 anti-terrorism law, violating international prohibitions against double jeopardy and the non-retroactivity of criminal law. Women



Journalists Without Chains remarked on the incapacity of the UAE's judicial system to deliver justice, noting its subservience to the executive branch and state security. This troubling alignment of the judiciary with governmental interests raises significant questions about the integrity of the justice system in a nation that claims to uphold tolerance while positioning itself as a leading economic hub in the Middle East.



**Nasser bin Ghaith Case:** On March 29, 2017, the court sentenced academic Nasser bin Ghaith to ten years in prison under the Cybercrime Law and the 2014 Anti-Terrorism Law. The charges, linked to anti-terrorism legislation, stemmed from his meetings with exiled Emirati

activists during a visit to Turkey. Additional accusations included "insulting the UAE, harming public security and national unity," and "publishing information that could tarnish the UAE's reputation." All these charges arose from his exercise of fundamental rights, including freedom of opinion, expression, assembly, and association. In July 2024, the court sentenced him to an additional 15 years in prison as part of the "UAE 84" case for his support and communication with the "Emirates Call for Reform" Association.



**Ahmed Mansoor Case:** On May 29, 2018, prominent human rights activist Ahmed Mansoor, recognized as the last outspoken advocate for human rights in the UAE, was sentenced to ten years in prison. He faced charges for

communicating with international human rights organizations, which were framed as attempts to "insult the prestige and status of the UAE, its symbols, and its leaders." Additionally, he was accused of "seeking



to harm the UAE's relationships with its neighbors" by disseminating false reports on social media. In July 2024, he was also sentenced to 15 years in the "UAE 84" case for allegedly supporting and communicating with a "terrorist organization" and for forming a human rights committee with fellow activists.

### Lack of Clear and Precise Definitions

The vague and ambiguous definitions within the law present significant dangers. They create legal uncertainty, preventing individuals from understanding what exactly constitutes a terrorist crime. This lack of clarity allows authorities to interpret terms broadly and arbitrarily, tailoring them to fit their needs. As a result, behaviors unrelated to actual terrorism can be criminalized, exposing individuals to prosecution based on exaggerated or unfounded charges.

The imprecise definition of "terrorist organization," coupled with the terrorism-related offenses outlined in Law No. 7 and another ambiguous term—"poses a threat to the state"—has turned the law into a tool for criminalizing political activity. Organizations and individuals that merely express dissent or whose religious or political views clash with the interests of the state often find themselves labeled as terrorist entities. This mischaracterization occurs not because they pose a genuine threat, but rather due to their opposition to the ruling authorities.

Several UN experts have raised alarms about the broad powers granted to executive authorities, noting that they can designate any entity as a terrorist organization without being required to provide objective justification for such designations. This lack of accountability could lead to the arbitrary and unreasonable application of the law, resulting in the criminalization or persecution of groups and individuals that are not inherently terrorist. The potential for misuse of these powers underscores the urgent need for clearer definitions and safeguards to protect legitimate political discourse and human rights.

### Arbitrary Designation of Individuals and Entities

Since 2014, the UAE has compiled terrorist lists that include numerous individuals and entities. While some of these may genuinely be linked to terrorism, many





designations appear to target those associated with the rights to form associations, freedom of thought, and political activism—activities that the UAE authorities oppose.

The process for designating individuals and entities is dictated by a Cabinet decision, initiated solely at the request of the Minister of Presidential Affairs. Notably, there is no detailed mechanism or independent committee overseeing these designations, and the judiciary is excluded from the process. This absence of objective criteria raises significant concerns about transparency and fairness. Individuals or entities are often designated without prior notification, denying them the chance to defend themselves or present evidence.



The lack of a formal designation mechanism means there is no oversight to establish what constitutes "terrorism." Law No. 7 of 2014 emphasizes a proactive counterterrorism approach, but it broadly categorizes crimes as those affecting state security. Consequently, the State Security Agency is tasked with gathering information aimed at safeguarding state interests. The 2003 law outlines areas of surveillance, including any political or organizational activity perceived as undermining state integrity, national unity, or economic stability.

Moreover, the authorities do not disclose the specific reasons or evidence supporting a designation, leaving affected individuals in the dark about the legal basis for their classification. This ambiguity complicates their ability to appeal the decisions.



Although the law permits an appeal within 60 days, the process lacks independence and does not offer a genuine opportunity for a fair review. The legal framework must ensure that individuals have the right to appeal before an impartial judicial body.

Dissidents living abroad and listed as terrorists have expressed skepticism about the appeal process, stating that appeals are often submitted to the same administrative body that made the original decision. As a result, many do not pursue appeals due to a lack of trust in the system. Notably, none of the individuals named in the January cabinet decision have filed complaints, as the UAE judiciary is perceived to be under the influence of the Cabinet, led by the Minister of Justice.

Over the past decade, Emirati authorities have intensified their crackdown on the Muslim Brotherhood and its alleged Emirati branch, the Association for Reform and Social Guidance. This peaceful organization had engaged in public discourse for years before facing arrests. Its members, including academics and journalists from various political backgrounds, called for political reform and adherence to Islamic principles. Many detainees from the controversial UAE 94 mass trial in 2017 were associated with the Islah movement, which the UAE designated as a terrorist organization in 2014.

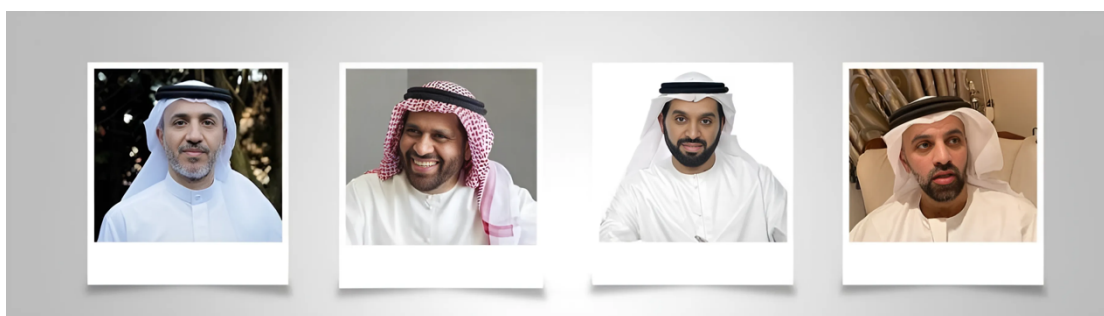
The UAE's Anti-Terrorism Law has been used to suppress dissent, targeting activists, exiles, and critics under broad security pretexts. The following cases highlight its use against peaceful expression and political opposition.

- **Recent Designations:** In early 2025, the UAE expanded its terrorist lists, adding names such as Yousef Hassan Ahmed Al Mulla, Saeed Khadem Ahmed Bin Touq Al Marri, Ibrahim Ahmed Ibrahim Al Hammadi, Abdul Rahman Hassan Munif Al Jabri, and Hamid Abdullah Abdul Rahman Al Junaibi Al Nuaimi. One individual was convicted in absentia during the controversial "UAE 94" mass trial of political dissidents in 2013. Another faced charges for supporting the detainees, while others were designated merely as relatives of political prisoners—without any terrorism-related charges—raising concerns about guilt by association. The UAE also designated several UK-based entities—including Cambridge Education and



Training Centre Ltd. and Imagine Ltd.—that are connected to Emirati dissidents. Despite operating legally in the UK, these institutions were labeled as terrorist organizations. Investigations by Women Journalists Without Borders revealed no listings for them on UK, EU, or UN sanctions databases, and the UK government has issued no public objection. These designations, though symbolic, have had chilling effects on the entities' activities and affiliations.

- **Noteworthy Cases of Dissidents:** In September 2021, Emirati human rights defenders Hamad Al Shamsi, Ahmed Al Nuaimi, Mohammed Al Zaabi, and Saeed Al Tunaiji were labeled as terrorists. UN special rapporteurs criticized the move, citing a lack of evidence and the appearance of retaliation for human rights work. Other politically motivated designations include the 2017 inclusion of Qatari media activists during a regional dispute. By late 2023, authorities revived terrorism charges against long-detained rights defenders, reframing past accusations or adding new ones. These cases often lack transparency—no formal charges or names are disclosed—fostering an environment of fear and silencing.



- **Targeting Peaceful Activism:** UAE authorities have used broadly defined anti-terrorism laws to penalize social media activity critical of the state or its allies. Jordanian teacher and activist Ahmed Al-Atoum was sentenced to ten years for posts criticizing regional governments. Similarly, Syrian human rights advocate Abdul Rahman Al-Nahas received a ten-year sentence in 2021 for charges including terrorism and insulting the state. He reportedly faced enforced disappearance, torture, and was denied legal counsel—violating rights to due process and protection from inhumane treatment.



- **Extradition Requests:** The UAE has sought the extradition of various journalists and activists. One case involves Egyptian national Abdul Rahman Yusuf al-Qaradawi, who was pursued under vague Egyptian charges of "opposing the state" and "inciting terrorism." Following his transfer to UAE custody, reports suggest he was subjected to enforced disappearance.

### The Right to Non-Discrimination

The UAE has repeatedly violated the right to non-discrimination by targeting individuals based solely on their familial or social ties to political detainees. Two exiled individuals designated on the January 2025 terrorism list stated, "We learned about our inclusion from media reports. We have never been charged or convicted of any terrorism-related offenses. Our only 'crime' is being related to detainees."

Placement on the terrorist list triggers immediate asset freezes and property seizures under the UAE's Counter-Terrorism Law and Cabinet Resolution No. 74 of 2020, depriving families of their livelihoods. The law further criminalizes any contact with designated individuals, imposing penalties of up to life imprisonment. This has resulted in extreme social and economic isolation—not only for those listed, but also for their relatives. One opposition figure noted that since being designated, he has been unable to speak with family members in the UAE due to fear of reprisal: "Communication with our relatives inside the country has become almost impossible."

Authorities have also arbitrarily revoked the citizenship of family members of detainees, rendering them stateless and denying them basic rights such as education, healthcare, employment, and freedom of movement. Some have faced persecution by security agencies, while others have been forced to sever personal relationships—including engagements and marriages—under the threat of collective punishment. Sanctioning individuals solely due to kinship or association, without evidence of personal involvement in terrorist acts, constitutes a clear violation of the principle of individual criminal responsibility. Such practices amount to collective punishment and systemic discrimination, inflicting unjust suffering on innocent people and serving as a coercive tool against political opposition.





## B. The Law's Impact on Human Rights Defenders

The UAE's counterterrorism framework poses a severe threat to the work of human rights defenders, civil society actors, and organizations monitoring the country's human rights situation. The law's expansive and vague definitions of "terrorism," "terrorism financing," and "incitement" enable the criminalization of core human rights activities—including documenting abuses, advocating for reform, or engaging with international bodies. Authorities have classified such acts as "spreading false information," "harming the reputation of the state," or even "supporting terrorist organizations," depending on how broadly and arbitrarily the law is applied.



These provisions grant the state sweeping powers to prosecute individuals, dissolve organizations, freeze assets, and silence dissent without requiring evidence of violence or intent to cause harm. Under the current legal framework, individuals may be designated as "terrorists" based solely on their affiliations or views, without proof of criminal conduct. The additional category of "dangerous terrorist" permits indefinite preventive detention on the basis of vaguely defined ideological criteria, violating the principle of the presumption of innocence and undermining legal certainty.

This legal ambiguity has produced a chilling effect, severely restricting freedoms of expression and association. Fear of prosecution has led to widespread self-



censorship, dismantling civic space and deterring public engagement with political or human rights issues. As the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights has cautioned, counterterrorism laws must target concrete actions rather than opinions or beliefs, and must never be used as tools of political repression.

Several cases illustrate how the law has been used to punish peaceful human rights work:



**Maryam Al Balushi and Amina Al Abdouli** were sentenced to an additional three years in prison in **2021** for "publishing information that disturbs public order." This followed their

sharing of audio recordings with UN Special Procedures, in which they described torture and abuse in UAE prisons. Al Abdouli was originally sentenced to five years in **2016** for tweets critical of the UAE and other regional governments. The UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention found that both women were subjected to unfair trials and arbitrary detention. Their cases demonstrate how the law is used to silence prisoners who expose abuse, even while in custody.



**Dr. Mohammed Al Roken**, a prominent Emirati lawyer and academic, is serving a **10-year** sentence for his peaceful advocacy in the "UAE 94" case, in which dozens of political activists were prosecuted. He was later sentenced to life imprisonment in the "UAE 84" case for defending political detainees and opposing the revocation of citizenship from dissidents.



### **Mohammed Al-Zaabi and Hamad**

**Al-Shamsi** were sentenced in absentia to life imprisonment in the "UAE 94" case. Both were later added to the UAE's terrorist list for their continued advocacy from

exile, including communications with international human rights mechanisms regarding political prisoners. Al-Zaabi, a former president of the Emirates Jurists Association—once one of the country's leading civil society organizations—was stripped of his role when the government dissolved the association's board in 2011. He now resides in the UK. Al-Shamsi leads the Emirati Detainees Advocacy Center and has similarly been targeted for his activism abroad.

Taken together, these cases reflect the systematic use of counterterrorism legislation to dismantle civil society, criminalize peaceful expression, and suppress legitimate dissent. Rather than targeting genuine threats, the law functions

### **III. International Responsibility of the UAE**

The United Arab Emirates (UAE) is a signatory to several international treaties and agreements that impose restrictions on its counter-terrorism measures and mandate respect for human rights. Therefore, assessing the compatibility of Federal Law No. (7) of 2014 with the UAE's international human rights obligations is essential. While the UAE has ratified certain human rights treaties, its status concerning other key instruments raises significant concerns, which are outlined below:



### **Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR)**

The principles enshrined in the UDHR are considered part of international law and are binding on all states. Numerous provisions of UAE law conflict with the fundamental rights



outlined in the declaration, including freedom of expression, freedom of assembly, the right to privacy, and the right to a fair trial. Core principles state that "all human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights" (Article 1), emphasizing equality and non-discrimination. Provisions in UAE law, particularly those concerning freedom of expression, assembly, and arbitrary detention, directly contradict these principles.



International Covenant on  
Civil and Political Rights

### International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR)

Although the UAE has not ratified this covenant, it is considered one of the most important international human rights standards and is often cited as a foundational reference for counter-terrorism responses and allegations of treaty violations. Many provisions of the new law explicitly contradict articles related to freedom of expression (Article 19), freedom of assembly (Article 21), freedom of association (Article 22), the right to a fair trial (Article 14), and protection against arbitrary detention (Article 9). The UAE's non-ratification of this covenant, coupled with documented practices under its anti-terrorism law, reveals a significant gap between its practices and international standards.

### A. Convention Against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (CAT)

The UAE is a party to this convention. Prolonged detention powers, restrictions on access to legal representation, and a lack of transparency in trials increase the risk of torture and ill-treatment, undermining accountability mechanisms and potentially violating the UAE's obligations under this convention. In July 2022, the UN Committee Against Torture expressed "particular concern" over reports detailing patterns of torture and ill-treatment against human rights defenders and individuals accused of state security crimes. This indicates a failure to comply with the state's commitments under the convention, despite its ratification.





### United Nations Security Council Resolutions on Counter-Terrorism

The UN consistently emphasizes that effective counter-terrorism measures and respect for human rights are mutually reinforcing goals. While these resolutions mandate

that states take measures against terrorism, they also stress the importance of upholding human rights and the rule of law in implementing such measures. Practices arising from the new law suggest an imbalance between these commitments. The vagueness, arbitrary detention, torture, violations of fair trial rights, and suppression of freedom of expression and assembly demonstrate that the law does not align with the principles of legality, necessity, proportionality, and non-discrimination as established in international human rights law.



## B. Comparative Analysis

**Table 3: Discrepancies Between Federal Law No. (7) of 2014 and International Standards.**

Aspect	International Standards	UAE Law and Practice
Definition of Terrorism and Terms	Definitions should be precise, clear, and limited to violent acts, distinguishing between them and peaceful political critique.	The law defines terms like "terrorist purpose" and "terrorist result" loosely, allowing for the criminalization of peaceful and legitimate activities.
Procedural Guarantees and Fair Trials	Right against arbitrary detention, immediate access to a lawyer, defined detention periods, and prohibition of torture-extracted evidence.	Allegations of arbitrary detention, prolonged detention, restricted access to lawyers, claims of torture, and secret or closed trials.
Indefinite Detention	Arbitrary deprivation of liberty is prohibited; detention must be time-bound and subject to judicial oversight.	The law allows for indefinite detention in "counseling" centers without a clear mechanism for contesting continued detention.
Judicial Independence	The judiciary must be entirely independent from the executive to ensure integrity and impartiality.	Reports indicate executive control over the appointment and promotion of judges, undermining judicial independence in politically sensitive cases.
Freedom of Expression and Association	Freedom of expression and association are fundamental rights, subject only to necessary and proportionate restrictions for legitimate aims.	Laws are used to criminalize peaceful political critique and broadly define crimes like "anti-state" or "harming national unity."
Investigation of Torture Allegations	Independent and transparent investigations into all torture allegations, holding perpetrators accountable.	No independent authorities to investigate torture complaints; reports indicate a lack of serious investigation into such allegations.
Ratification of International Instruments	States are encouraged to ratify major international human rights treaties, such as the ICCPR.	The UAE has not ratified several key international treaties, including the ICCPR.
Cooperation with UN Mechanisms	States should fully cooperate with UN experts and human rights mechanisms.	UN experts have expressed concern over limited cooperation from the UAE.

## IV. Conclusion and Recommendations

The critical review of Federal Law No. (7) of 2014 on combating terrorist offenses in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) exposes significant inconsistencies between the law's stated purpose and its practical application. While framed as a national security



measure, the law's vague and overly broad definitions of "terrorism" and "terrorist organizations" grant authorities sweeping discretionary powers. This legislative ambiguity enables the criminalization of peaceful civic engagement, including freedom of expression, association, and assembly, thereby undermining the fundamental rights guaranteed under international law.

The use of this law has led to serious human rights violations, as documented by multiple sources, including United Nations experts. These violations include arbitrary arrests, indefinite detention—particularly in so-called "counseling" centers—torture and other forms of ill-treatment, denial of legal counsel, and unfair trials marked by secret proceedings and coerced confessions. The pattern suggests a systematic use of counter-terrorism legislation as a tool of political repression rather than a means of addressing genuine security threats.

Case studies further illustrate that the law functions to silence dissent and dismantle civil society, contributing to a climate of fear and self-censorship. The UAE's continued failure to ratify key international treaties, such as the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), and its non-compliance with obligations under instruments it has ratified—such as the Convention Against Torture (CAT)—highlight a profound gap between international human rights commitments and domestic legal practice.

In light of these findings, Women Journalists Without Chains (WJWC) urges the UAE government to undertake urgent reforms to align its counter-terrorism framework with international legal standards. WJWC also calls on international actors—including UN bodies, human rights organizations, and the UAE's Western allies—to exert meaningful diplomatic and policy pressure to encourage these reforms.

The following recommendations outline a rights-based framework for revising the UAE's counter-terrorism approach in a manner consistent with the rule of law and international human rights obligations:

#### **A. Clarify and Narrow Legal Definitions**

1. Revise the definitions of "terrorism," "terrorist purpose," "terrorist result," and "terrorist organization" to ensure they are clear, narrowly tailored, and



consistent with international standards focused on violent and genuinely threatening conduct.

2. Eliminate vague terms such as "anti-state," "undermining internal or international security," or "influencing public authorities," which are often used to criminalize peaceful activism and criticism.
3. Ensure that counter-terrorism laws are limited to clearly defined criminal acts based on the principles of legality, necessity, and proportionality.
4. Guarantee that laws are comprehensible to the public and do not leave individuals uncertain about what conduct is criminalized.

#### **B. Strengthen Procedural Safeguards and Fair Trial Guarantees**

1. Amend the law to explicitly protect fair trial rights, including the prohibition of arbitrary detention, immediate and unhindered access to legal counsel, reasonable limits on pre-charge and pre-trial detention, and exclusion of evidence obtained under torture or coercion.
2. Ensure transparency in judicial proceedings, including public access to trials and disclosure of charges and evidence.
3. Annul convictions in cases where individuals were prosecuted solely for exercising their human rights, especially in mass trials and in instances of wrongful designation on terrorism lists.

#### **C. End Indefinite Detention and Reform Counseling Centers**

1. Repeal provisions allowing for indefinite detention, including those concerning "counseling" centers. If such facilities are retained, ensure detainees have legal avenues to challenge their detention and that detention periods are strictly time-bound.
2. Guarantee that any "rehabilitation" programs are voluntary, respect freedom of belief and expression, and do not amount to ideological coercion.
3. Limit preventive detention to cases where there is a **current, direct, and imminent** threat, not merely speculative or potential risks.
4. Ensure that any deprivation of liberty complies fully with international human rights norms.





#### **D. Safeguard Judicial Independence**

1. Implement structural reforms to ensure the independence of the judiciary, including insulating judicial appointments, promotions, and disciplinary processes from executive influence.
2. Reduce reliance on secret or special courts for terrorism-related cases and enhance transparency and public oversight of judicial proceedings.
3. Repeal or amend laws that violate due process, including legislation enabling arbitrary revocation of nationality.

#### **E. Protect Freedom of Expression, Assembly, and Privacy**

1. Amend the counter-terrorism law and related legislation, such as cybercrime laws, to ensure they are not misused to suppress dissent, journalism, or peaceful assembly.
2. Uphold the rights of journalists, human rights defenders, and political activists to operate without harassment, censorship, or prosecution.
3. Restrict the use of force in public assemblies to lawful, necessary, and proportionate measures in line with international standards.
4. Repeal provisions that criminalize peaceful criticism of state institutions, political opposition, or perceived "disloyalty" to the state or its leaders.
5. Ensure that administrative restrictions—such as travel bans or communication monitoring—are subject to judicial oversight and not used as de facto punitive measures.
6. End the practice of labeling peaceful dissenters and their affiliates as "terrorists" without due process or objective legal criteria.
7. Enforce legal protections for the right to privacy, including explicit limitations on state surveillance, access to personal and financial data, and electronic monitoring.

#### **F. Investigate Torture and Ill-Treatment**

1. Initiate prompt, independent, and impartial investigations into all credible allegations of torture or ill-treatment in detention facilities.



2. Ensure accountability by prosecuting perpetrators and banning the use of torture-extracted confessions or statements in legal proceedings.
3. Prohibit prolonged solitary confinement, which may constitute torture or inhuman treatment under international law.

#### **G. Ratify Core International Human Rights Treaties**

1. Ratify the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and other outstanding human rights instruments.
2. Withdraw any reservations to ratified treaties that contradict their fundamental principles.
3. Encourage international partners to condition political and economic cooperation—including trade agreements—on demonstrable progress in human rights reform, backed by enforceable clauses.

#### **H. Fully Cooperate with UN Human Rights Mechanisms**

1. Ensure full engagement with UN human rights bodies by:
  - Responding to requests for country visits by special procedures mandate holders;
  - Submitting overdue periodic reports;
  - Implementing the recommendations of treaty bodies and Universal Periodic Review (UPR) mechanisms.



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