



American ideals. Universal values.

BLUEPRINT

How to Counter Terrorism by Supporting Civil Society in the United Arab Emirates

BLUEPRINT FOR U.S. GOVERNMENT POLICY

MAY 2015

Human Rights First

American ideals. Universal values.

On human rights, the United States must be a beacon. Activists fighting for freedom around the globe continue to look to us for inspiration and count on us for support. Upholding human rights is not only a moral obligation; it's a vital national interest. America is strongest when our policies and actions match our values.

Human Rights First is an independent advocacy and action organization that challenges America to live up to its ideals. We believe American leadership is essential in the struggle for human rights so we press the U.S. government and private companies to respect human rights and the rule of law. When they don't, we step in to demand reform, accountability, and justice. Around the world, we work where we can best harness American influence to secure core freedoms.

We know that it is not enough to expose and protest injustice, so we create the political environment and policy solutions necessary to ensure consistent respect for human rights. Whether we are protecting refugees, combating torture, or defending persecuted minorities, we focus not on making a point, but on making a difference. For over 30 years, we've built bipartisan coalitions and teamed up with frontline activists and lawyers to tackle issues that demand American leadership.

Human Rights First is a nonprofit, nonpartisan international human rights organization based in New York and Washington D.C. To maintain our independence, we accept no government funding.

© 2015 Human Rights First
All Rights Reserved.

WHERE TO FIND US

This report is available online at humanrightsfirst.org

75 Broad Street, 31st Floor,
New York, NY 10004

Tel: 212.845.5200
Fax: 212.845.5299

humanrightsfirst.org

805 15th Street, N.W., #900
Washington, DC 20005

Tel: 202.547.5692
Fax: 202.543.5999

1303 San Jacinto Street, 9th Floor
at South Texas College of Law, Houston, TX 77002

Tel: 713.955.1360
Fax: 713.955.1359

“Countries that respect human rights—including freedom of association—happen to be our closest partners... When these rights are suppressed, it fuels grievances and a sense of injustice that over time can fuel instability or extremism. So I believe America’s support for civil society is a matter of national security.”

—President Obama, September 23 2014

Introduction

President Obama recently made a series of commendable declarations supporting civil society and affirming its importance to securing stability and fighting extremism.

At the White House's Summit on Countering Violent Extremism in February 2015 he announced, "When people are oppressed, and human rights are denied—particularly along sectarian lines or ethnic lines—when dissent is silenced, it feeds violent extremism. It creates an environment that is ripe for terrorists to exploit. When peaceful, democratic change is impossible, it feeds into the terrorist propaganda that violence is the only answer available."

The President added, "[W]e must recognize that lasting stability and real security require democracy. That means free elections where people can choose their own future, and independent judiciaries that uphold the rule of law, and police and security forces that respect human rights, and free speech and freedom for civil society groups."

That same month he said, "My argument to any partner that we have is that you are better off if you've got a strong civil society and you've got democratic legitimacy and you are respectful of human rights."

In April 2015, speaking specifically about the six U.S. allies that comprise the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC)—Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar, Oman, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE)—he noted, "The biggest threats that they face may not be coming from Iran invading," and warned of "populations that, in some cases, are alienated, youth that are underemployed, an ideology that is destructive and nihilistic, and in some cases, just a belief that there are no legitimate political outlets for grievances."

A lack of peaceful outlets for political grievances does indeed drive extremism and instability, but the Obama Administration continues to provide seemingly unconditional political and military support for GCC countries that have actually increased their repression against civil society in recent years.

This contradiction at the heart of U.S. policy must be confronted and resolved, especially because it has a direct bearing on counterterrorism cooperation and U.S. national security interests. The president promised to have a "tough conversation" with the GCC leaders about their destructive policies. The White House and Camp David meetings with GCC leaders on May 13-14, 2015 provides the perfect opportunity to develop that conversation.

Human Rights First produced blueprints in 2015 for how the United States can support civil society in Bahrain and Saudi Arabia to encourage reform and respect for human rights—advances that would help bring stability to a volatile region and align with the administration's stated policy goals.

This report extends that series to an analysis of the repression of another U.S. security partner in the Gulf: the United Arab Emirates. It examines the UAE's relations with the United States and what Washington can do to support a besieged Emirati civil society. Strong, functioning civil societies across the world—including in the UAE—are, as President Obama rightly identified, "a matter of national security" for the United States.

This report is based on research conducted during a Human Rights First fact-finding trip to the UAE in April 2015, including dozens of discussions with human rights defenders, civil

society activists, journalists, academics, lawyers, independent experts, officials from the United States and other governments, and others. Local human rights activists spoke to Human Rights First on condition of anonymity out of fear for their safety. Human Rights First thanks all those who provided information for this report.

Trouble in Paradise

Local press reports on polls about the UAE would lead you to think the country is as near to paradise as possible. The UAE claims to have four percent of the world's oil and nearly four percent of its natural gas. It built a galloping economy in just a generation, offering opportunities to hundreds of thousands of international workers.

The 2015 World Happiness Report published by the Sustainable Development Solutions Network (SDSN), a global initiative for the United Nations whose donors include Dubai 2020 Expo, ranked the UAE 20 out of 158 countries. The report assessed GDP per capita, life expectancy, social support, freedom to make life choices, generosity, and freedom from corruption.

A 2015 survey of Arab youth found that the UAE is the top place to live for young Arabs, followed by the United States, Germany, and Canada. The report suggests the UAE is a country of opportunity for young Arabs across a range of industries, from technology start-ups to the arts to finance, all within a familiar culture.

Many Emiratis and foreigners who live in the UAE enjoy a high tech, modern lifestyle with large salaries. The UAE has the highest per capita mobile phone penetration in the world, with 2.3 phones per person, and the world's

highest smartphone penetration. The International Monetary Fund expects the UAE economy to grow 3.5 percent in 2015 and 2016 despite falling oil prices. A new space center has been announced to oversee preparations for the Emirates first Mars probe, due to launch by 2021.

An impressively lavish lobbying and PR machine in Washington, D.C.—more expensive than that of any other Middle Eastern country—aggressively pushes the UAE's positive image.

But the UAE doesn't tolerate dissent and targets human rights activists, threatening the country's progress and stability. The most recent (2013) U.S. State Department human rights report on the UAE states, "The three most significant human rights problems were citizens' inability to change their government; limitations on citizens' civil liberties (including the freedoms of speech, press, assembly, association, and internet use); and arbitrary arrests, incommunicado detentions, and lengthy pretrial detentions."

No political parties are allowed. According to the State Department report, "The constitution provides for an independent judiciary; however, court decisions remained subject to review by the political leadership and suffered from nepotism. There were reports that the State Security Department intervened in judicial affairs."

The authorities have tried to suffocate the country's civil society in recent years, jailing dozens of dissidents after unfair trials, throwing out international think tanks, and disbanding local organizations.

Much of this fear appears to be rooted in the perceived challenge from political Islam and the possibility of contagion from protests during the 2011 uprisings elsewhere in the region. Many in

the government feared the well-organized UAE Islamic group al Islah—which claimed up to 20,000 supporters—would present the same challenge that the Muslim Brotherhood posed in Egypt. The UAE opposed the Brotherhood’s political influence, leading to a tense relationship between the UAE and Egypt during President Morsi’s rule. It subsequently financed and offered strong political backing to new Egyptian President Sisi. The UAE’s opposition to the Muslim Brotherhood also led to strained relations with fellow GCC member Qatar, which supported the Brotherhood and its affiliates in other countries during the uprisings.

The Arab Spring protests represented an existential challenge to the authoritarian rulers of Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and other GCC states, who opposed popular demands for more representative government, such as the demands for constitutional monarchy in Bahrain. These demands threatened these countries’ authoritarian systems of absolute monarchy. The GCC states, led by Saudi Arabia, pushed against the spread of demands for more democratic governance across the region. They were particularly opposed to Muslim Brotherhood-led political movements, which provided an alternative vision of Islamic government to that practiced in Saudi Arabia and the Emirates, thereby undermining the claims to religious legitimacy on which the ruling royal families rest their authority.

Many—though not all—of the civil society figures targeted in the UAE over the last few years are associated with al Islah, or are perceived to be. Others, like human rights defender Ahmed Mansoor, are regarded as more secular figures and dangerous for their support of basic political freedoms. The few remaining activists need support if civil society is to survive in the UAE.

Migrant workers’ rights remain a sensitive issue. The UAE’s economic growth requires rapid infrastructure development, which largely relies on the labor of workers from Asia and elsewhere. Workers are not allowed to unionize and strikes are illegal. Safety issues are likewise a cause of concern. In April 2015 construction workers in Ras Al Khaimah set fire to the Emirates National School building site and a number of cars after a co-worker fell to his death under disputed circumstances. An Indian laborer reportedly fell from the fifth floor of a building. Police pronounced his death a suicide, but workers claim their colleague died due to a lack of safety equipment. Allowing labor unions, human rights organizations, lawyers associations, and other groups to flourish would contribute to improving dangerously sub-standard labor conditions.

United in Security

The United States plays a key role in the UAE’s economic boom. The UAE is America’s largest trading partner in the Middle East, with a 90 percent growth in trade over the last decade and over 1,000 U.S. companies in the country. Apart from U.S. diplomatic and military personnel, an estimated 50,000 Americans live in the UAE. Dubai’s Emirates Airlines is the single largest customer for Boeing’s 777 aircraft.

UAE state media declared in April the country is “united in security” with the United States, reminding readers the UAE is the “only Arab country to join the United States on six military operations over the last 25 years,” including the First Gulf War, Afghanistan, Somalia, Kosovo, Libya, and ISIL.

As U.S. Ambassador Barbara Leaf told the Senate Foreign Relations Committee at her nomination hearing in September 2014, “The UAE is a strong military partner and a reliable contributor to coalition operations, participating in five major such efforts with the U.S. since Operation Desert Storm. This cooperation is only amplified on a bilateral basis. The port of Jebel Ali in Dubai is the U.S. Navy’s busiest overseas port-of-call, hosting more Navy liberty ship visits than any other port outside of Norfolk. The UAE plays host to some three thousand U.S. military personnel and key U.S. military assets. The UAE is one of our largest Foreign Military Sales (FMS) customers, with over 90 implemented FMS cases valued at approximately \$19.2 billion.”

U.S.-UAE relations are guided by the 1994 Defense Cooperation Agreement (DCA), allowing the United States to use Jebel Ali port and Al Dhafra Air Base. Jebel Ali is capable of handling aircraft carriers and Al Dhafra is the only overseas base where F-22s are stationed. The United States used both facilities for major combat operations in Afghanistan and Iraq from 2001 to 2011, and continues to utilize them for ongoing operations in Iraq and Syria. There are approximately 5,000 U.S. military personnel stationed in the UAE.

Approximately 600 to 800 UAE military personnel study and train in the United States each year. UAE Air Force personnel also participate annually in Desert Falcon exercises at Nellis Air Force Base in Nevada.

Senior government leader and head of the feared State Security Apparatus, Abu Dhabi Crown Prince Sheikh Mohammed Bin Zayed Al Nahyan met with President Obama, Vice President Joe Biden, and Defense Secretary Carter in Washington on April 20, 2015 to discuss, according to Sheikh Mohammed, “new

steps to enhance the already deep security between the United States and the UAE.”

Sheikh Mohammed is a regular visitor to D.C., commanding red carpet treatment and access to the highest possible levels of the U.S. government.

While U.S. officials admit there are human rights problems in the UAE, they are often reluctant to raise the most difficult ones—such as the freedom to criticize the government. Apart from the annual State Department country reports, the United States is rarely openly critical of the UAE’s human rights record. There are moments of candor, such as former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton’s speech in Qatar in January 2011 as the first protests of the Arab Spring were building force when she remarked, having been in the UAE the previous day, “in too many places, in too many ways, the region’s foundations are sinking into the sand.” She called on the region’s leaders “to make the political reforms that will create the space young people are demanding, to participate in public affairs and have a meaningful role in the decisions that shape their lives.” She admonished, “It is time to see civil society not as a threat but as a partner.” But such strong rhetoric is rarely implemented as policy. When U.S. government officials do raise human rights issues, they are usually in areas where the UAE government is slightly more open to dialogue, such as workers’ rights. But avoiding more difficult conversations will not serve U.S. or UAE interests in the long term.

The situation in the UAE validates President Obama’s observation that silencing dissent and denying human rights is likely to fuel extremism and violence. A veteran analyst in the UAE told Human Rights First, “Many of those who left to fight with ISIS or other groups in Syria or Iraq are men from Salafist groups that were

arrested, tortured and harassed, even after they were released from jail. They were living under continual pressure in all aspects of their lives and so chose another route to change things.”

In January of this year, the International Center for the Study of Radicalization and Political violence estimated 15 foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq came from the UAE, similar to numbers of fighters they estimated from nearby Bahrain and Qatar.

These are not the first terrorists the UAE has produced. Two of the September 11, 2001 hijackers who attacked New York’s World Trade Center were Emiratis—Fayez Banihammad and Marwan al Shehhi—according to the U.S. government’s 9/11 Commission Report.

The UAE has also been a major financial backer of violent extremist groups in Syria, some of which became part of ISIL. With his customary frankness, U.S. Vice President Joe Biden in October 2014 disclosed the administration’s concern over this support for extremists. He said, “our biggest problem is our allies” who are engaged in a Sunni-Shiite war against Syrian President Bashar Assad. He reportedly specifically named Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE.

“What did they do? They poured hundreds of millions of dollars and thousands of tons of weapons into anyone who would fight against Assad—except that the people who were being supplied were [Jabhat] al-Nusra and al-Qaida and the extremist elements of jihadis coming from other parts of the world,” he said, according to the Associated Press. He later tried to walk back these comments, saying he never meant to imply that the United Arab Emirates was supporting al-Qaida fighters in Syria.

Attacks on Dissent

The UAE authorities began their crackdown on civil society in March 2011, a few weeks after President Ben Ali in Tunisia and President Mubarak in Egypt were removed from office. Mass protests had erupted in Bahrain and in the Eastern Province of Saudi Arabia. In the UAE, the crackdown came in response to a petition signed by 133 people asking for the authorities to begin a process of democratic reform. The signatories included leading members of civil society—academics, lawyers, former judges, and journalists, among others. The government reaction was swift, and the following month five activists were arrested.

Local activists say the targeting of civil society has intensified since then. It is often carried out in the name of counterterrorism at the hands of Sheikh Mohammed’s State Security. Local human rights activists estimate over 200 people are in jails in the UAE for political reasons. Few civil society representatives remain in the country and out of jail.

During her Senate nomination hearing in September 2014, Ambassador Leaf noted, “the UAE government has periodically encroached on its citizens’ freedoms of expression and association. If confirmed as U.S. Ambassador to the UAE, I pledge to engage in a productive and candid dialogue on these issues, working from the core values and democratic principles that define America.” Evidence of such dialogue has yet to surface.

Some of the UAE’s remaining civil society leaders question the U.S. commitment to human rights in the Gulf state. “It’s all talk, American talk, supporting human rights. They never back it up, just keep selling weapons to our

government while it puts lawyers in jail,” said one Emirati rights activist.

Beyond the annual human rights reports, the United States rarely says anything publicly critical of the UAE, except in cases where U.S. citizens are involved. When the UAE government named two U.S.-based organizations on a list of terrorist organizations in November 2014, the State Department response was: “The United States does not consider these U.S. organizations to be terrorist organizations. But we are seeking more information from the Government of the UAE about why that designation was made by them and what their background—what their information is.” (In May 2015, GCC interior ministers met in Saudi Arabia and agreed to harmonize a blacklist of “terrorist organizations and individuals.”)

Human rights activists and the families of political prisoners say they feel abandoned by the United States because of Washington’s lack of criticism of the UAE. They believe this failure to speak out has encouraged the UAE authorities to push the crackdown further.

The U.S. Embassy in Abu Dhabi should promote both the Countering Violent Extremism initiative President Obama launched in February 2015 and the Standing With Civil Society project announced in September 2014. The president’s remarks should be posted in English and Arabic as a reminder that U.S. official policy is to support civil societies under threat, not just in the UAE but worldwide. Embassy officials should also post the guidelines on engaging with human rights defenders, issued by the U.S. State Department in March 2013, as a basis for discussion with civil society leaders.

Political Islam, terrorism, and criticism of repressive governance have become interchangeable in much of the government’s

thinking, notes one veteran analyst in the UAE. This indiscriminate application of repressive measures risks being counterproductive since it extends to non-violent government critics and closes avenues for peaceful dissent. It thereby exacerbates the problems of violent extremism that such measures are ostensibly designed to combat.

Last year’s UAE Law 7-2014, On Combating Terrorism and Terrorist Activities, included new offenses regarding the definition of “terrorist outcome.” Article 1 defines a terrorist outcome expansively as: “Stirring panic among a group of people, killing or causing grave physical harm, or material damage to property or environment, disrupting/undermining the social domestic or international security, antagonizing the state, impacting the public authorities in the State or other states or international organizations as they go about exercising their duties or receiving from the State or other states or organizations a benefit or privilege of any kind.”

Article 15 allows for the criminalization of “whoever publicly declares his animosity or lack of allegiance to the State or regime.”

The law is extremely broad in its potential application. The list of 83 “terrorist” organizations issued by the UAE cabinet ranged from armed terrorist groups like ISIL and Boko Haram to American and European Muslim humanitarian and rights groups, including the Council on American Islamic Relations (CAIR) headquartered in Washington, D.C. and the Muslim American Society (MAS) based in Virginia. The American-based groups are not designated as terrorist organizations in the United States.

Activists considered associated with political Islam, particularly the Muslim Brotherhood, are especially vulnerable. The UAE continues to send large donations to President Sisi in Egypt

in part to help his efforts to crush the Brotherhood.

Muslim organizations are not the only ones targeted by the UAE government. In March 2012 the government closed down the U.S.-funded National Democratic Institute and the German democracy think tank Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung. Polling organization Gallup also closed their office in Abu Dhabi that month. Later in the year the UAE shut down the Abu Dhabi office of the RAND Corporation, the American policy research institute.

Previously tolerated local civil society organizations have been disbanded, including the Association of Teachers and the Association of Jurists. Former heads of the Jurists Association are now political prisoners, including renowned constitutional scholar Dr. Mohammed al Roken. He is one of dozens serving long prison sentences after being convicted in the mass “94 Trial” of 2013. The unfair trial of 94 defendants took place in the State Security courts from March to July 2013. The court convicted 69 defendants who were sentenced to between seven and 15 years in prison. The prosecution’s evidence relied on confessions that defendants claimed were forced out of them by torture in custody. International observers were not allowed into the court. Abdullah al-Hadidi, the son of one of the defendants, was sentenced to 10 months in jail for tweeting details of the case “in bad faith.” There is no appeal recourse on verdicts from this court.

Al Roken was one of few human rights lawyers who defended activists—others have been jailed or fled the country. Witnesses are intimidated and harassed and the courts now offer virtually no protection for the freedoms of speech or association.

Only a tiny handful of dissidents currently remain in the country and out of jail. These include prominent human rights defender Ahmed Mansoor, named as a 2015 finalist for the internationally prestigious Martin Ennals Human Rights Defender Award. He is an alumni of the University of Colorado at Boulder, where he graduated with an MSc in engineering in 1999. He remains a defiant symbol of dissent, but there are few like him left. “Sometimes it’s like moving a mountain stone by stone,” he says of his struggle for human rights in the UAE. “Many people privately say they agree with me—I say ‘Come and join us, courage is contagious.’”

Sheikh Mohammed’s State Security is seen as the UAE Stasi. Its power has grown over the last ten years and now it ostensibly controls the government, penetrating every ministry. Part of its power is its ability to grant or withhold the security clearances needed for employment.

In February 2014 the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the Independence of Judges and Lawyers said she had received credible evidence of mistreatment and torture of detainees held in secret detention sites. Despite numerous reports of torture, mistreatment, and disappearances, no member of the State Security has been investigated for any of these crimes.

Families of detainees live in fear of reprisals from the agency. Three sisters who were summoned to a police station in Abu Dhabi in mid-February have not been heard from since. The three women, Asma Khalifa al-Suwaidi, Mariam Khalifa al-Suwaidi, and Alyaziyah Khalifa al-Suwaidi, are sisters of Issa Khalifa al-Suwaidi, a political prisoner convicted with al Roken and 67 others, who is serving ten years in jail. These three women are part of a pattern of forced disappearances by the authorities.

Activists fear the longer they are held the more likely they will eventually be charged.

“It’s got so much worse in the last few years,” one human rights defender told Human Rights First. “Ten years ago arrests without warrants or disappearances happened but they were rare. Now they’re common.” Others associated with dissident activity have had their citizenship revoked. In December 2011 six men had their citizenship stripped because according to local media, they were allegedly connected to “suspicious regional and international organizations and personalities.” The men were said to be associated with the Al Islah movement.

Al Islah (which means “reform”) was officially set up in the UAE in 1974 with permission from the UAE authorities. It confined itself to charity work and student competitions in the early decades, but it was suspected of having ideological ties to the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood movement. The group was disbanded in Dubai in 1994 but continued to operate, speaking out against what it saw as over-liberal attitudes in the UAE to alcohol, inappropriate dress, and other excesses.

Even relatives of political prisoners have been targeted in recent months. Some have been hit with arbitrary travel bans that prevent them from leaving the country.

Activists blame the State Security Apparatus for tampering with official government files holding their I.D. and other information. They said that dates of birth have been changed so that adults are officially registered as children, making it impossible for them to get driver’s licenses and other essential documents. Sometimes other critical details are modified. This administrative harassment sends people into an endless bureaucratic loop, preventing them from getting or renewing passports, applying for school,

opening bank accounts, and carrying out their normal lives in general. The denial of a security clearance amounts to the denial of a job, the denial of a normal life. Many activists are unable to support themselves financially and some are even destitute. Others say State Security vehicles with tinted windows have tried running them off the road.

“It’s a soft repression but very effective,” one activist told me. “State Security basically runs the country, no matter who the official government is. It’s unaccountable, omnipotent, and scares everyone.”

No Bandwidth for Online Criticism

Nearly all peaceful dissent in the UAE is silenced, both on and offline. Those who have allegedly shown disloyalty to the government by posting criticism online are routinely jailed. The UAE’s Telecom Regulatory Authority blocks websites that are not “in line with UAE laws.” These include the websites of the Gulf Center for Human Rights, gc4hr.org, uaeprison.com, and others.

On November 25, 2014, the State Security Court sentenced online activist Osama Al-Najjar to three years in prison and a 500,000 Emirati Dirham (approximately US \$136,000) fine on charges including offending the state via Twitter, instigating hatred against the state via Twitter, and spreading lies about the torture of his father, Hossain Al-Najjar, who is serving an 11-year jail term for his human rights activities. He tweeted that his father and other political detainees were mistreated in prison.

A prominent tool the government uses is a “cybercrimes decree” issued by President Khalifa on November 13, 2012 (Federal Legal Decree No. 5/2012), which establishes a legal basis to prosecute and jail people who use information technology to promote dissent. Article 28 of the decree institutes imprisonment and large fines for anyone who uses information technology to “incite actions that endanger state security or infringe on the public order.” Article 30 orders life imprisonment for anyone using such technology to advocate the overthrow or change of the system of governance. Obaid al-Zaabi was arrested under the decree in December 2013, accused of “offending the Supreme Court” for posting tweets criticizing the lack of free speech in the UAE. Although acquitted on June 23, 2014 he remains in custody, held in the prisoner’s ward of an Abu Dhabi hospital.

U.S. citizen Shezanne Cassim, a graduate of the University of Minnesota, was working in Dubai in 2013 when he was arrested for posting an online parody video about youth culture in Dubai. He was detained in a Dubai jail for two months before being transferred to a maximum-security prison in Abu Dhabi. Cassim was charged with endangering state security and public order under UAE’s strict 2012 cybercrime law and sentenced to one year in prison. He says he faces difficulties getting a job in the United States because he now has a criminal record.

In January 2015 helicopter mechanic Ryan Pate, who worked for a company based in the UAE, was in Florida recovering from a back injury. While in the United States he posted criticism of the company on Facebook. When he returned to the UAE in February he was arrested and jailed.

Pate told the Associated Press that he couldn’t comprehend the charges because “as an American growing up in the United States, the First Amendment right is just ingrained in my brain. I never even entertained the fact that I would wind up in prison out here for something I put on Facebook in the United States.”

When asked about the case, U.S. State Department spokesperson Marie Harf said, “U.S. citizens are subject to local laws when traveling or residing abroad,” making no mention of the free speech principles at stake in this case. The company dropped the charges and Pate returned to the United States at the end of March.

Repressive cybercrime legislation and a poor record on internet freedom—not to mention the closing down of several U.S. organizations and research institutes in the country—make the UAE government a questionable partner for the U.S. government to choose for establishing a digital communications hub “to counter terrorist propaganda.” Details of the joint project are still emerging, but it appears that a new U.S.-UAE venture will soon be operational, based in the Emirates.

President Obama rightly identifies “free speech and freedom for civil society groups” as essential elements in multilateral efforts to counter violent extremism. But as the UAE routinely denies online freedom of speech, blocks websites, and undermines counter-terrorism efforts by jailing human rights activists, a clear and transparent explanation of how this venture will likely work and how it will promote the role of freedom of expression and civil society in order to counter extremism is urgently needed.

An Emirati human rights defender told Human Rights First, “Those most likely to turn to extremism here are those under pressure from

the government, those whose living conditions are threatened, those without hope and those not allowed to live normal lives. Repression will create radicalism.”

Recommendations

In order to support civil society in the UAE, the U.S. government should implement the following recommendations.

- At the May 2015 meeting of the GCC leaders in Washington, President Obama should tell the representatives of the UAE government that human rights violations in the UAE run counter to the strategy he has outlined for fighting extremism and that opening much greater space for civil society would ultimately serve the best interests of both countries.
- Make clear to the government of the UAE that its ambitions to become the premier international center of expertise in countering violent extremism will not be realized, and will not enjoy sustained American support, unless its restrictions on freedom of expression and its repression of independent civil society activists comes to an end. Moreover, its misuse of overbroad counterterrorism laws to silence peaceful dissent must also end. The U.S. government should ensure that civil society organizations are involved in running of counterterrorism center and that the terms of agreement are drawn up in consultation with regional civil society actors and organizations. The terms of agreement should also be made public.
- Urge the UAE authorities to introduce an appeals process at the State Security Court, consistent with international legal standards.
- Broaden the U.S. Embassy’s dialogues with civil society and human rights figures in the UAE to include discussion of counterterrorism cooperation, the effects of U.S. assistance, and to solicit recommendations for how the United States can advance human rights protections through its counterterrorism and countering violent extremism (CVE) cooperation and assistance.
- The U.S. government should make greater efforts to engage with the shrinking number of activists and others who could form the base of a rejuvenated civil society.
- New U.S. Ambassador to the UAE Barbara Leaf should assist relevant U.S. agencies to implement the September 2014 presidential memo directive that “Each [U.S. government] agency abroad shall incorporate inclusive outreach to civil society in their international engagement.” Ambassador Leaf should help facilitate this engagement between civil society and U.S. agencies. Whether Department of Defense officials are visiting the UAE to monitor progress or Department of Commerce representatives are exploring new investment opportunities, or if any other U.S. agency visits the UAE, the Embassy should endeavor to facilitate contacts between U.S. government officials and the UAE’s beleaguered civil society representatives.
- Offer resources to local civil society figures and other community-based stakeholders to counter violent extremism and develop programming designed and/or implemented by those local groups. Countering violent extremism, or CVE, aims to reduce the

number of terrorism supporters by addressing the reasons people become attracted to terrorism in the first place: poor social, institutional, and economic conditions, political and/or religious repression, and the influence of terrorist leaders who promise to improve these conditions and provide greater meaning and purpose to new recruits' lives.

- Promote the State Department's March 2013 guidelines entitled "U.S. Support for Human Rights Defenders," and the September 2014 presidential directive on supporting civil society. Both should be promoted and featured—in Arabic and English—on the U.S. embassy website in the UAE. These documents would help explain to the Emirati authorities and civil society the standard approach and policies towards human rights defenders and civil society activists by the U.S. government across the world, and lay out the expectations and limitations on what civil society and human rights defenders can expect from the U.S. government in the UAE and elsewhere.

- The U.S. Ambassador should publicly state whether or not trials of political opponents and human rights activists observed by U.S. government officials meet international standards.

Conclusion

To achieve real and lasting progress, the UAE needs a thriving civil society that is able to criticize the government, free from fear of harassment or jail. On each item of President Obama's list of prerequisites for stability—free elections, an independent judiciary, police and security forces that respect human rights, free speech, and freedom for civil society groups—the UAE is failing badly.

A coherent, consistent U.S. government interagency approach to support freedoms of expression, association, and assembly and to end repression of civil society will make meaningful impact against violent extremism and better serve U.S. interests in the UAE.



American ideals. Universal values.

WHERE TO FIND US

75 Broad Street, 31st Floor,
New York, NY 10004

Tel: 212.845.5200
Fax: 212.845.5299

humanrightsfirst.org

805 15th Street, N.W., #900
Washington, DC 20005

Tel: 202.547.5692
Fax: 202.543.5999

1303 San Jacinto Street, 9th Floor
at South Texas College of Law, Houston, TX 77002

Tel: 713.955.1360
Fax: 713.955.1359