



**Australian Government**  
**Refugee Review Tribunal**

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# Country Advice

## United Arab Emirates

United Arab Emirates – ARE38151 –  
Human rights – Police – Christianity -  
Catholics

7 February 2011

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**1. Please provide country information on the human rights situation in UAE generally, particularly in the context of someone who allegedly criticised the government.**

The United Arab Emirates is a federation of seven emirates with power still residing principally in their ruling families. A Supreme Council comprising the rulers of each of the emirates elects a president and vice-president for five-year terms. Decrees of the Council require the assent of Abu Dhabi and Dubai and at least three other emirates. A prime minister and cabinet is appointed by the President and a Federal National Council of 40 members essentially provides the only consultative mechanism for citizens to express political views. Since 2006 20 of these members have been determined through indirect election.<sup>1</sup>

There are no political parties and there are practical restrictions on freedom of assembly and expression, even though the constitution recognises freedom of speech and the press. The law expressly forbids criticism of rulers and the judiciary is subject to political intervention. According to Freedom House, discussion of political matters may take place in private but permits are required for public gatherings and all nongovernmental organisations (NGOs) must be registered with the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs.<sup>2</sup>

Although the UAE's constitution provides for some freedom of expression, the government has historically restricted this right in practice. The 1980 Printing and Publishing Law applies to all media and prohibits "defamatory material and negative material about presidents, friendly countries, [and] religious issues, and [prohibits] pornography." Consequently, journalists commonly practice self-censorship, and the leading media outlets frequently publish government statements without criticism or comment. However, Dubai has a "Media Free Zone," where few restrictions have been reported on print and broadcast media produced for audiences outside of the UAE. Government officials continue to ban a variety of publications and internet websites. In 2009, the government continued its consideration of a restrictive press law that will reintroduce prison terms for journalists who "disparage"

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<sup>1</sup> 'United Arab Emirates' *Political Handbook of the World Online Political Handbook of the World Online Edition*, originally published in Banks, A., Muller, T., Overstreet, W., and Isacoff, J. (eds.) 2010, *Political Handbook of the World 2010*, Washington: CQ Press  
[http://library.cqpress.com/phw/document.php?id=phw2010\\_unitedarabemirates&type=toc&num=190#H2\\_2](http://library.cqpress.com/phw/document.php?id=phw2010_unitedarabemirates&type=toc&num=190#H2_2) – Accessed 7 February 2011 – Attachment 1

<sup>2</sup> Freedom House 2010, 'Freedom in the World 2010 – United Arab Emirates' 3 May - Attachment 2  
It should be noted that there are no international NGOs based on the country, however visits may be organised under certain conditions.

government officials or write stories that "harm the country's economy." The draft law also threatens fines of up to \$136,000 for commentary on the poor economy and up to \$1.35 million for articles "insulting" to the ruling family or government. In July, the Abu Dhabi Federal Court of Appeal suspended the newspaper Emarat al-Yawm for three weeks and fined its editor \$5,445 for an October 2006 article that claimed some of the ruling family's thoroughbred race-horses were given steroids.<sup>3</sup>

The US Department of State recorded in 2010 that criticism of government was permissible 'in a limited context, but criticism of ruling families, particularly sheiks, was not permitted. Nevertheless, criticism of sheiks occurred, albeit with extreme caution, and in private.'<sup>4</sup>

Human Rights Watch has recently reported that an attempt to organise a peaceful protest over oil prices in July 2010 resulted in the arrest of the four organisers. Even although the protest did not proceed, one of them lost his government job and he was detained for a week whilst another was held for over a month. A popular online discussion forum on political rights and similar subjects UAE Hewan (<http://uachewan.net>) was also blocked.<sup>5</sup>

Trade unions are outlawed and cannot be formed and strikes by public sector employees are not permitted. Grievances must be addressed through administrative appeal or civil court action. Protests by workers whose pay had been delayed or over other working conditions in the private sector have taken place in 2009 and 2010 and authorities have sometimes been required to disperse such protestors.<sup>6</sup>

## **2. Please provide information on whether a person the subject of an arrest warrant for supporting terrorism would face difficulty departing the country lawfully.**

According to the most recent annual report on terrorism by the US State Department, the UAE government 'repeatedly condemned terrorist acts in Iraq, Lebanon, Pakistan, and elsewhere in the region.' In addition,

In order to prevent extremist preaching in UAE mosques, the General Authority of Islamic Affairs and Endowments provided guidelines for all Friday sermons and monitored compliance. The UAE worked to keep its education system free of radical influences and emphasized social tolerance and moderation.

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The UAE has a cyber-crime law criminalizing the use of the Internet by terrorist groups to "promote their ideologies and finance their activities." The UAE has established a National Security Council charged with formulating and implementing a national strategic plan.

During 2009, seven people were charged with terrorist related offences and one US citizen was convicted of supporting a foreign terrorist organisation and deported to Lebanon.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Freedom House 2010, 'Freedom in the World 2010 – United Arab Emirates' 3 May - Attachment 2

<sup>4</sup> US Department of State 2010, *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2009 – United Arab Emirates*, March, Section 2a - Attachment 3

<sup>5</sup> Human Rights Watch 2011, *World Report – United Arab Emirates*, January - Attachment 4

<sup>6</sup> US Department of State 2010, *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2009 – United Arab Emirates*, March, Section 7 - Attachment 3

<sup>7</sup> US Department of State 2010, *2009 Country Reports on Terrorism – United Arab Emirates*, 5 August - <http://www.unhcr.org/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/refworld/rwmain?page=printdoc&docid=4c63b61830> – Accessed 1 February 2011 – Attachment 5

In November 2010 Dr Abdulrahim Alawadi, chairman of the National Committee to Combat Terrorism, announced a review of the country's anti-terrorism law to ensure it was consistent with international regulations against money laundering, even though these measures were already being implemented in practice.<sup>8</sup>

A genuine terrorist suspect is unlikely to be allowed to depart the country unhindered. UAE legislation allows for the detention of terrorist suspects for up to six months without charge. The US State Department reports that male citizens 'involved in legal disputes under adjudication were not permitted to travel overseas.'<sup>9</sup> Sometimes warrants are not obtained although technically police have 48 hours to advise the public prosecutor of an arrest;

Police stations received complaints from the public, made arrests, and forwarded cases to the public prosecutor. The public prosecutor then transferred cases to the courts. In cases involving foreign defendants, especially for crimes of moral turpitude, authorities often summarily deported the defendants upon completion of their jail terms. Police must report an arrest within 48 hours to the public prosecutor, who then must determine within 24 hours whether to charge, release, or further detain the suspect. In practice the public prosecutor did not always meet the 24-hour time limit, although police usually adhered to their 48-hour deadline. Public prosecutors may order detainees to be held as long as 21 days without charge or longer, in some cases, with a court order. Courts may not grant an extension of more than 30 days of detention without charge; however, judges may renew 30-day extensions indefinitely. Public prosecutors may hold suspects in terrorism-related cases without charge for six months. Once a suspect is charged, the Supreme Court handles terrorism cases, which may extend the detention period indefinitely.<sup>10</sup>

The quality of the police force in the UAE seems to be of a very high standard. The World Economic Forum's Enabling Trade Index ranks it the fourth most reliable in the world.<sup>11</sup> Each police force operates with a degree of autonomy under the general direction of the Ministry of Interior which has the power to enforce compliance with federal policy and law and investigate complaints. There appears to be a very low level of corruption.<sup>12</sup>

Information sourced from the Government of Dubai website is consistent with this assessment, which states that it has more than 17,000 police officers, ISO 2000:9001 accreditation, and has been a leader in the adoption of new technologies to improve criminal investigations and general operations.<sup>13</sup>

### **Note on penalties for drug-related offences**

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<sup>8</sup> 'UAE begins review of anti-terrorism law' 2010, *The National*, 28 November, <http://www.thenational.ae/news/uae-news/politics/uae-begins-review-of-anti-terrorism-law> - Accessed 7 February 2011 - Attachment 6

<sup>9</sup> US Department of State 2010, *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2009 – United Arab Emirates*, March, Section 2d - Attachment 3

<sup>10</sup> US Department of State 2010, *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2009 – United Arab Emirates*, March, Section 1d - Attachment 3

<sup>11</sup> 'UAE ranks 4<sup>th</sup> in reliability of police services' 2010, UAE Interact website [source: Emirates News Agency], 5 September, [http://www.uaeinteract.com/docs/UAE\\_ranks\\_4th\\_in\\_reliability\\_of\\_police\\_services/42455.htm](http://www.uaeinteract.com/docs/UAE_ranks_4th_in_reliability_of_police_services/42455.htm) - Accessed 5 February 2011 – Attachment 7

<sup>12</sup> US Department of State 2010, *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2009 – United Arab Emirates*, March, Section 1d - Attachment 3

<sup>13</sup> 'Dubai Police' (undated), Government of Dubai website, <http://www.dubai.ae/en.portal?topic,DPDEG,0.& nfpb=true& pageLabel=dept> – Accessed 5 February 2011 - Attachment 8

The US Department of State notes that the United Arab Emirates imposes strong punishment for drug-related offences:

Penalties for possession, use, or trafficking in illegal drugs in the United Arab Emirates are severe, and convicted offenders can expect long jail sentences and heavy fines. Legislation enacted in January 1996 imposes the death sentence for convicted drug traffickers.

Since January 2006, possession of even trace amounts of illegal drugs has resulted in sentences of four years imprisonment for foreign citizens transiting the UAE. Some drugs normally taken under a doctor's supervision in the United States, and even some over-the-counter U.S. drugs and medications, are classified as narcotics in the UAE and are illegal to possess.<sup>14</sup>

**3. Please provide information about the treatment of Christians, particularly Catholics, in UAE, including information about state protection for Christians against Muslim extremists. Please also comment on whether there might be parts of UAE where a Christian can live safely.**

Information sourced from the United Arab Emirates Ministry of Economy referred to by the US Department of State indicates that approximately 9% of the population is Christian. The constitution states that Islam is the official religion and of the citizen population approximately 85% are said to be Sunni and about 15% or less are Shi'a.<sup>15</sup> Between 70-85% of the population comprises non-citizens. Members of most religions appear to be able to practice their religion with relatively little interference and there is a climate of tolerance. Proselytising is not permitted and conversion by Islamic citizens to another religion is not recognised. Churches are not permitted to display crosses or other symbols on the outside of their buildings.<sup>16 17</sup>

The Christian population of the country as a proportion of the total population is amongst the highest in the Middle East with estimates of at least half a million Christians residing in the UAE. Some estimates are higher, of up to one million, or above.<sup>18 19</sup> Catholics comprise the largest Christian denomination and this is perhaps not surprising given the large Philippine expatriate community. Christians from other countries such as Bangladesh, India, Lebanon, Iraq and others are also to be found. On 31<sup>st</sup> May 2007 diplomatic relations were established between the Holy See and the UAE and the official communiqué noted that in establishing these ties, there was an expectation that UAE

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<sup>14</sup> US Department of State Bureau of Consular Affairs 2010, 'UAE Country Specific Information', 15 September, [http://travel.state.gov/travel/cis\\_pa\\_tw/cis/cis\\_1050.html](http://travel.state.gov/travel/cis_pa_tw/cis/cis_1050.html) - Accessed 2 February 2011 - Attachment 9

<sup>15</sup> US Department of State 2010, *International Religious Freedom Report for 2010 – United Arab Emirates*, November - Attachment 10

<sup>16</sup> US Department of State 2010, *International Religious Freedom Report for 2010 – United Arab Emirates*, November - Attachment 10

<sup>17</sup> Institute on Religion and Public Policy 2008, 'United Arab Emirates: Institute Submission to United National Periodic Review: Religious Freedom in the United Arab Emirates', 21 July - Attachment 11

<sup>18</sup> Magister, Sandra 2007, 'The Christians are coming back to Arabia – Fourteen centuries after Mohammed', Chiesa Espresso website [source: Avvenire], <http://chiesa.espresso.repubblica.it/articolo/164081?eng=y> – Accessed 1 February 2011 - Attachment 12

<sup>19</sup> 'Holy See announces diplomatic ties with United Arab Emirates' 2007, Catholic Newsagency website, 31 May, [http://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/holy\\_see\\_announces\\_diplomatic\\_ties\\_with\\_united\\_arab\\_emirates](http://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/holy_see_announces_diplomatic_ties_with_united_arab_emirates) - Accessed 1 February 2011 - Attachment 13

authorities would ‘maintain cordial relations with the Catholic Church and will approve the building of new centers of worship’.<sup>20</sup>

There are at least 34 Christian churches in UAE and these are built on land donated by ruling families of the emirates where they are built. There are reportedly 7 Catholic churches and services are conducted in languages including English, Arabic, French, Malayalam, Tamil, and Tagalog.<sup>21 22 23</sup>

Some church services attract such numbers that they are unable to be accommodated and worshippers are required to follow services from outside.<sup>24 25</sup> A photograph of worshippers at St Mary’s Church, Oud Metha, Dubai, published in 2008 appears to show what could be hundreds of people in attendance at a service.<sup>26</sup>

Catholic churches are found in Dubai, Jebel Ali, Sharjah, Fujairah, and Ras al Khaimah.<sup>27</sup>

## Attachments

1. ‘United Arab Emirates’ *Political Handbook of the World Online Political Handbook of the World Online Edition*, originally published in Banks, A., Muller, T., Overstreet, W., and Isacoff, J. (eds.) 2010, *Political Handbook of the World 2010*, Washington: CQ Press  
[http://library.cqpress.com/phw/document.php?id=phw2010\\_unitedarabemirates&type=toc&num=190#H2\\_2](http://library.cqpress.com/phw/document.php?id=phw2010_unitedarabemirates&type=toc&num=190#H2_2) – Accessed 7 February 2011/.
2. Freedom House 2010, ‘*Freedom in the World 2010 – United Arab Emirates*’ 3 May. (CISNET - CX257062)

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<sup>20</sup> ‘Holy See announces diplomatic ties with United Arab Emirates’ 2007, Catholic Newsagency website, 31 May,  
[http://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/holy\\_see\\_announces\\_diplomatic\\_ties\\_with\\_united\\_arab\\_emirates](http://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/holy_see_announces_diplomatic_ties_with_united_arab_emirates)  
– Accessed 1 February 2011 – Attachment 13

<sup>21</sup> ‘Being Filipino. Spirit of Christmas is alive in the UAE’ 2008, Inquirer weblog, 22 December,  
<http://blogs.inquirer.net/beingfilipino/2008/12/22/spirit-of-christmas-is-alive-in-the-uae/> – Accessed 1 February 2011 – Attachment 14

<sup>22</sup> ‘Churches and temples in the UAE’ 2008, *Gulf News*, 5 April,  
<http://gulfnews.com/news/gulf/uae/general/churches-and-temples-in-the-uae-1.96526> – Accessed 1 February 2011 – Attachment 15

<sup>23</sup> See information concerning mass services for parishes on the St Mary’s Konkani Community website including ‘St Mary’s Catholic Church Sharjah – Regular Weekly Church Services’ 2011,  
<http://www.konkanuae.com/home/wpages.asp?id=26> – Accessed 4 February 2011 – Attachment 16

<sup>24</sup> Magister, Sandra 2007, ‘The Christians are coming back to Arabia – Fourteen centuries after Mohammed’, Chiesa Espresso website [source: Avvenire], <http://chiesa.espresso.repubblica.it/articolo/164081?eng=y> – Accessed 1 February 2011 – Attachment 12

<sup>25</sup> ‘Going to church in Abu Dhabi’ 2008, *Washington Post*, 8 May,  
[http://onfaith.washingtonpost.com/onfaith/guestvoices/2008/05/going\\_to\\_church\\_in\\_abu\\_dhabi.html](http://onfaith.washingtonpost.com/onfaith/guestvoices/2008/05/going_to_church_in_abu_dhabi.html) – Accessed 1 February 2011 – Attachment 17

<sup>26</sup> ‘Churches and temples in the UAE’ 2008, *Gulf News*, 5 April,  
<http://gulfnews.com/news/gulf/uae/general/churches-and-temples-in-the-uae-1.96526> – Accessed 1 February 2011 – Attachment 15

<sup>27</sup> ‘St Mary’s Catholic Church Sharjah – Regular Weekly Church Services’ 2011,  
<http://www.konkanuae.com/home/wpages.asp?id=26> – Accessed 4 February 2011 – Attachment 18; ‘Churches and temples in the UAE’ 2008, *Gulf News*, 5 April, <http://gulfnews.com/news/gulf/uae/general/churches-and-temples-in-the-uae-1.96526> – Accessed 1 February 2011 – Attachment 15



3. US Department of State 2010, *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2009 – United Arab Emirates*, March.
4. Human Rights Watch 2011, *World Report – United Arab Emirates*, January. )
5. US Department of State 2010, *2009 Country Reports on Terrorism – United Arab Emirates*, 5 August.
6. 'UAE begins review of anti-terrorism law' 2010, *The National*, 28 November, <http://www.thenational.ae/news/uae-news/politics/uae-begins-review-of-anti-terrorism-law> - Accessed 7 February 2011.
7. 'UAE ranks 4<sup>th</sup> in reliability of police services' 2010, UAE Interact website [source: Emirates News Agency], 5 September, [http://www.uaeinteract.com/docs/UAE\\_ranks\\_4th\\_in\\_reliability\\_of\\_police\\_services/42455.htm](http://www.uaeinteract.com/docs/UAE_ranks_4th_in_reliability_of_police_services/42455.htm) - Accessed 5 February 2011.
8. 'Dubai Police' (undated), Government of Dubai website, [http://www.dubai.ae/en.portal?topic,DPDEG,0,&\\_nfpb=true&\\_pageLabel=dept](http://www.dubai.ae/en.portal?topic,DPDEG,0,&_nfpb=true&_pageLabel=dept) – Accessed 5 February 2011.
9. US Department of State Bureau of Consular Affairs 2010, 'UAE Country Specific Information', 15 September, [http://travel.state.gov/travel/cis\\_pa\\_tw/cis/cis\\_1050.html](http://travel.state.gov/travel/cis_pa_tw/cis/cis_1050.html) - Accessed 2 February 2011.
10. US Department of State 2010, *International Religious Freedom Report for 2010 – United Arab Emirates*, November.
11. Institute on Religion and Public Policy 2008, 'United Arab Emirates: Institute Submission to United National Periodic Review: Religious Freedom in the United Arab Emirates', 21 July. (CISNET - CX209872)
12. Magister, Sandra 2007, 'The Christians are coming back to Arabia – Fourteen centuries after Mohammed', *Chiesa Espresso* website [source: Avvenire], <http://chiesa.espresso.repubblica.it/articolo/164081?eng=y> – Accessed 1 February 2011.
13. 'Holy See announces diplomatic ties with United Arab Emirates' 2007, Catholic Newsagency website, 31 May, [http://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/holy\\_see\\_announces\\_diplomatic\\_ties\\_with\\_united\\_arab\\_emirates](http://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/holy_see_announces_diplomatic_ties_with_united_arab_emirates) - Accessed 1 February 2011.
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15. 'Churches and temples in the UAE' 2008, *Gulf News*, 5 April, <http://gulfnews.com/news/gulf/uae/general/churches-and-temples-in-the-uae-1.96526> - Accessed 1 February 2011.
16. 'St Mary's Catholic Church Sharjah – Regular Weekly Church Services' 2011, <http://www.konkanuae.com/home/wpages.asp?id=26> – Accessed 4 February 2011.

17. 'Going to church in Abu Dhabi' 2008, *Washington Post*, 8 May,  
[http://onfaith.washingtonpost.com/onfaith/guestvoices/2008/05/going\\_to\\_church\\_in\\_abu\\_dhabi.html](http://onfaith.washingtonpost.com/onfaith/guestvoices/2008/05/going_to_church_in_abu_dhabi.html) - Accessed 1 February 2011.
18. 'St Mary's Catholic Church Sharjah – Regular Weekly Church Services' 2011,  
<http://www.konkanuae.com/home/wpages.asp?id=26> – Accessed 4 February 2011.