

Human Rights Watch

Torture, Former Combatants, Political Prisoners, Terror Suspects, & Terrorists

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Move Casts Doubt on the UAEs Role as a Global Counterterrorism Partner

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(Beirut) [UAE](#) authorities in September 2021 designated four prominent exiled Emirati dissidents as terrorism supporters, Human Rights Watch said today. The move is part of a continuing attempt to outlaw activism and free expression under the guise of counterterrorism.

The [list](#) of people and organizations supporting terrorism also included at least one person who has been detained for over a year without being brought before a judge or allowed legal representation, further demonstrating the UAEs blatant disregard for the rule of law.

The UAE has shown time and again the nefarious ways that it uses counterterrorism as a guise for suppressing legitimate dissent and criticism, said [Michael Page](#), deputy Middle East director at Human Rights Watch. For many years the UAE has sent a crystal-clear message to its citizens and residents: Youre either with us or youre a terrorist.

The four exiled Emirati dissidents are Hamad al-Shamsi, Mohammed Saqr al-Zaabi, Ahmed al-Shaiba al-Nuaimi and Saeed al-Tenaiji. The designations immediate effects on them include asset freezes, property confiscations, and criminalizing their UAE-based relatives communications with them.

The dissidents told Human Rights Watch that the authorities had threatened their families with prosecution for communicating with terrorists. The men learned of their designation only after the Cabinet of Ministers issued the decision. People placed on the list may file a complaint, and if it is rejected or ignored, challenge the decision in court within 60 days.

The United States, the United Kingdom, and other international partners [consider](#) the UAE an [active](#) ally in countering terrorism, terrorist financing, and violent extremism across the region despite the UAEs deeply flawed criminal justice system and its well-documented use of overbroad counterterrorism legislation to arbitrarily repress dissidents and activists.

The four Emirati dissidents belong to a group of 94 political activists, known as the UAE94, that UAE authorities accused of crimes against national security in 2013 based on their peaceful statements and affiliations. The group included prominent human rights lawyers, judges, teachers, and student leaders. A UAE court held an [egregiously unfair mass trial](#) that resulted in lengthy prison sentences for 69 defendants, eight of whom, including the four, were charged and sentenced in absentia. None of the four men attempted to challenge their designations as terrorism supporters because they believe that UAE authorities will not allow it since they were convicted in absentia, one dissident said.

[Al-Shamsi](#) is the executive director of the Emirati human rights organization [Emirates Detainees Advocacy Center](#), a nonprofit organization that advocates on behalf of Emirati political prisoners. Al-Shamsi is based in Turkey.

[Al-Zaabi](#) is the former president of the Emirates Jurists Association, which was one of UAEs most prominent civil society organizations until 2011, when the [government issued a decree to dissolve](#) its board of directors as part of a broader crackdown on peaceful dissent. Al-Zaabi is now based in the UK.

[Al-Nuaimi](#) is a writer, education consultant, and specialist in applied educational psychology. His brother is the prominent imprisoned political activist Khaled al-Shaiba al-Nuaimi, currently serving a 15-year prison sentence stemming from the UAE94 trial. Al-Nuaimi is also based in the UK.

And [al-Tenaiji](#) is an Emirati researcher and currently heads both the Gulf Center for Studies and Dialogue and the Emirati Association Against Normalization with Israel. Al-Tenaiji is based in Turkey.

All four are in self-imposed exile, and all four have reported [various forms of harassment](#) at the hands of Emirati state security forces

against members of their family based in the UAE simply because they are relatives. They include travel bans, active surveillance, restrictions on basic rights including employment and education, and even passport revocations.

On November 5, al-Nuaimis son with quadriplegia, whom UAE authorities had banned from travel since at least 2014 as a form of apparent reprisal against his father, [died in a UAE hospital](#). He had been [separated from his father for nine years](#) and his mother and siblings, all of whom had fled to the UK in 2014, for at least seven years.

The exiled dissidents worried that the unjust designations as terrorists could also be followed by the UAE filing specious Interpol red notices against them. A UAE interior ministry official is running this year for president of Interpol, which Human Rights Watch and the Gulf Centre for Human Rights have warned could jeopardize the global police organizations commitment to its [human rights obligations](#).

The dissidents also raised concerns that the widespread publishing of their names and pictures on UAE-affiliated media and social media accounts could put them at risk of investigation both in the UK, one of the UAEs top allies [including on counterterrorism efforts](#), and in Turkey and elsewhere. None of the men have been investigated or questioned by UK or Turkish authorities.

The UAE added 34 other individuals and 15 entities to its [terrorism list in September](#). Human Rights Watch cross-referenced all the names against other global terror and financial sanctions lists, including the United Nations Global Sanctions list, the European Union Sanctions list, and the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade Consolidated list. Human Rights Watch confirmed that 14 of the 38 individuals and 2 of the entities are on other lists.

Human Rights Watch has also confirmed that at least one of the other people included on the list in September is a non-Emirati businessman who lived and worked in the UAE for many years. A source close to his family said that UAE authorities arrested the man in a night raid on his home in late 2019 and held him incommunicado for almost 3 weeks in a likely enforced disappearance. He remains arbitrarily detained without charge or trial. His family members who live in the UAE are struggling financially as a result of the asset freezes stemming from his terrorist designation.

The UAEs notorious counterterrorism law gives the UAE cabinet the authority to issue a decision on the creation of a list(s) of terrorist organizations or persons that pose a threat to the State. The law broadly defines terrorist acts as, among other things, stirring panic among a group of people and antagonizing the state, without requiring that the act intend to cause death or serious injury to achieve a political or ideological goal.

Commenting on the UAEs counterterrorism law in November 2020, several UN experts [warned](#) that the executive branch could approve the proscription of any entity as a terrorist entity without being required to legally demonstrate that there is objective reason to believe that such a designation is justified, despite the far-reaching implications that such a designation could have. UN experts also warned that the law could contribute to an arbitrary and unreasonable use of these powers, potentially leading to the criminalisation or persecution of organisations or individuals that are not genuinely terrorist in nature.

The UAE should immediately stop using its abusive counterterrorism regulations to persecute peaceful dissidents and human rights defenders, should ensure that everyone has the right to a fair trial, including the presumption of innocence, and the authorities should immediately remove the terrorism designations of the four prominent Emirati dissidents, Human Rights Watch said.

The UAEs wanton and complete disregard for the rule of law should stand as a stark warning to the US, the UK, and other countries that consider the UAE a reliable counterterrorism partner in the region, Page said.

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