

New technologies: harnessing opportunities and addressing challenges: The EU continued to promote freedom of expression, while rejecting hate speech, and discussed this extensively during the third Human Rights Dialogue held in Brussels in November 2023.

Delivering by working together: During the EU-KSA Human Rights Dialogue, the EU and the Saudi Human Rights Commission agreed to step up their cooperation on migrants and labour rights, together with the International Labour Organisation.

3. EU bilateral political engagement: On 28 November 2023, the EU and KSA held their third Human Rights Dialogue in Brussels²⁵. It was co-chaired by the EU Special Representative for Human Rights and the President of KSA’s Human Rights Commission (HRC). Locally, the EU Delegation and EU Member States’ ambassadors have been regularly raising human rights issues with Saudi interlocutors. The EU Delegation issued the annual Chaillot Prize, for protecting and promoting Human Rights in the Gulf Cooperation Council countries and continued work with previous Saudi award winners.

4. EU financial engagement: Under the FPI financial programme “Enhanced EU-GCC Political Dialogue, Cooperation and Outreach”, women empowerment and human rights remains one of the priorities. In line with the spirit of Team Europe initiatives, EU Member States contributed to events promoting EU human rights priorities locally.

5. Multilateral context: The EU-KSA Human Rights Dialogue provided an opportunity to exchange views on international human rights law and cooperation on multilateral fora. Greater coordination in multilateral fora will allow for a convergence of positions on specific initiatives. In 2023, KSA prepared for the Universal Periodic Review (held in January 2024). The EU has been urging KSA to ratify the UN Human Rights main Conventions (CCPR, CESCR, CAT-OP, CCPR-OP2-DP, CED, CMW). Saudi authorities have been cooperating with the UN Office in Riyadh, as well as UN agencies based abroad to deal with issues related to combatting human trafficking and allegations of human rights violation at the border with Yemen.

United Arab Emirates

1. Overview of the human rights and democracy situation: The UAE continued to balance its human rights record and international reputation, especially socio-economic rights; largely according to relevant to recommendations from the Universal Periodic Review (UPR) in 2018 and 2023. Civil and political rights, in particular, and political pluralism continue to be restricted. Progress has been observed in case of individual and minority rights and freedoms, and protection against discrimination. Federal National Council elections took place in October 2023.

²⁵ https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/saudi-arabia-third-eu-ksa-human-rights-dialogue-held-brussels_en

Besides the HR Council's UPR (4th cycle) in May 2023, the global climate conference COP28 in Dubai (December 2023) attracted global attention, also in terms of human rights and fundamental freedoms. There were no major incidents nor imprisonments reported in relation to freedom of expression of the foreign NGOs and activists. Moderate expressions of activism, especially against fossil fuels and the war in Gaza took place.

Given the country's unique multicultural concept of tolerance and coexistence, religious and expatriate minorities can live freely and practice their various religions. The UAE has been an active promoter of interfaith dialogue, e.g. the Abrahamic Family House in Abu Dhabi (an interfaith centre opened in March), and a new Hindu temple in Jebel Ali / Dubai end of 2023.

The country sustained progress and ambition on human rights with respect to the elimination of discrimination, especially in case of women and disabled people. Recent laws strengthened protection of women (including sexual harassment), codified equal pay and conditions in the workplace. Since October, women in the UAE no longer require their husband's consent to undergo emergency abortions, in case of mother (or child) medical risks.

On the basis of the family law reforms adopted gradually in 2020 and 2021, the UAE decriminalised consensual relationships outside of marriage and strengthened protection of children born out-of-wedlock. Since 2022 a new federal law regulating the *personal status* matters of non-Muslims offers to non-Muslims the option to apply their home country's civil laws, and hence equal male/female rights on matters such as testimony, estate, marriage, divorce and joint custody.

On migrant workers' rights, the government made some progress regarding labour standards, especially ahead of the Expo 2020 Dubai (2021-2022) and during the covid-19 pandemic. However, the sponsorship (*kefala*) system remains broadly in place with partially easing terms for employees e.g. a longer work-permit transition period, or the new (involuntary) loss of employment insurance scheme (since 2023). The new Labour Law (2022) consolidated workers' rights with respect to discrimination, wages and unlimited contracts. Since 2008, the Abu Dhabi Dialogue serves as a forum for dialogue between countries of labour origin in Asia and destination in the Gulf.

Building on covid-19 restrictive measures, the UAE ramped up its surveillance capacity and AI technologies and nearly all public and on-line spaces remain closely monitored. While the UAE issued its first federal personal data protection decree law (No. 45/2021), inspired – allegedly - by the EU's General Data Protection Regulation, deficiencies in data protection remain.

Although the UAE constitution formally guarantees free speech, fundamental freedoms, including the freedom of expression, remain curbed. Authorities can censor local or foreign media if they criticise the UAE or their policies. Political dissidents and human right activists continue to face severe obstacles to exert their civil and political rights.²⁶ The death penalty remains a punishment for certain grave crimes.

To address some human rights deficiencies as recommended by the UPR in 2018, the UAE embarked on a human rights relevant legislation review and announced the preparation of its National HR Action Plan (by National Human Rights Committee), which remains overdue since early 2022. In 2021/2022, a formally an independent body - National Human Rights Institution - was established according to the Paris Principles, which after its initial public appearances

²⁶ For instance, on 16/09/2021, the European Parliament adopted Resolution 2021/2873(RSP) on the case of human rights defender Ahmed Mansour in the UAE.

and engagements remained rather invisible throughout 2023. The UAE did not sign any (major) international covenants in 2023, such as the ICCPR and ICESCR.

2. EU action - key focus areas: The EU's human rights work focuses on fundamental freedoms, individuals and groups vulnerable to discrimination (incl. prisoners), women's and girls' rights and gender equality, the rule of law and administration of justice, UAE's National HR Action Plan, including business and human rights, and finally digital technologies and artificial intelligence (AI).

The EU has been supporting the UAE's efforts to promote women empowerment, including in the context of their UNSC and Human Rights Council memberships. EU's cooperation with the UAE on gender equality is in line with the Country Level Implementation Plan (CLIP).

The EU analysed the new labour law, domestic labour law, and federal personal status law (2022) and monitors their implementation; also in cooperation with ILO's efforts. Several HR promotion and public awareness campaigns were coordinated with EUMSs in social media.

3. EU bilateral political engagement: The EU and UAE held the informal Human Rights dialogue in January 2024. Discussions centred on labour rights, freedom of expression, digital technologies and AI, rule of law and women's rights. The EU stressed the importance of ratifying major international HR instruments. Progress has been commended in case of women empowerment, remaining challenges discussed in the field of migrant labour protection; while renewed concerns were raised as regards conditions of vulnerable individuals and minorities' rights, in particular LGBTI.²⁷

4. EU financial engagement: Under the FPI funded *Enhanced EU-GCC Political Dialogue, Cooperation and Outreach* project, the EU organised events in cooperation with the UAE's 'civil society' and academia.

5. Multilateral context: The UAE has taken up its seat in the Human Rights Council (2022-2024), as well as a non-permanent member in the UNSC (2022-2023). This created opportunities for engagement and consultation on multilateral human rights issues. Building upon its previous support for the UAE's National Action Plan for the implementation of UN Security Council Resolution 1325, the EU continued engaging in advocacy for women's participation in peacekeeping and post-conflict efforts. The EU carried out several demarches vis-a-vis the UAE, including the EU's thematic, country and regional priorities at the HRC and UNGA.

Republic of Yemen

²⁷ https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/uae-12th-human-rights-dialogue-held-brussels_en