Criminalizing Truth: Gulf Governments Must End the Crackdown on Information

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Since the United States and Israel launched strikes on Iran on February 28, 2026, triggering a wave of Iranian missile and drone attacks across the region, Gulf governments have moved swiftly to seal, even further, the information environment, controlling what their populations can see, say, and share about the attacks unfolding in their cities.

Across Kuwait, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Bahrain, Qatar, Oman and Saudi Arabia, authorities have issued sweeping bans on filming, sharing, or commenting on footage related to Iranian attacks on their territory.

The scale and speed of the crackdown is striking. In Qatar, authorities arrested 313 people of various nationalities for filming and circulating videos and what authorities described as “misleading information.” In Bahrain, dozens have been arrested for sharing videos or posts on social media with authorities framing these acts not as content sharing but as “a betrayal of the country.” In the UAE, the Attorney General ordered the arrest and expedited trial of 35 people, including a British national, while the Abu Dhabi police announced it had arrested at least 375 individuals from various nationalities on the suspicion of filming incidents related to Iran’s attacks on the UAE and sharing what is characterised as misleading information online.

The crackdown has also targeted journalists and media workers directly. In Kuwait, Ahmed Shihab-Eldin was detained for 52 days before his citizenship was revoked, alongside that of his two sisters. In Bahrain, photographer Sayed Baqer Al-Kamel was sentenced to 10 years in prison, in addition to cases of brief detention reported in the UAE and Qatar. The Committee to Protect Journalists has documented cases of targeted silencing against journalists including the blocking of access to several X accounts by the UAE’s public prosecutor. Among the accounts affected were those of Saudi state-owned channel Al Arabiya, Saudi journalist Malek Al-Rougui, and Algerian journalist Ahmed Hafsi.

Similar restrictions have also been imposed on Facebook and Instagram, where Meta geo-blocked the accounts of independent civil society organizations including ALQST for human rights and Democratic Diwan, researchers and academics in Saudi Arabia and the UAE following government requests under local cybercrime legislations. Since March 2026, more than 100 Facebook pages and Instagram accounts have reportedly been restricted, further reinforcing a wider pattern of digital censorship and information ecosystem control across the Gulf.

The legal infrastructure of repression

Each government has reached for its own legal toolkit, but the underlying logic is the same across the region: cybercrime, state security, and public order laws are drafted broadly enough to criminalize almost any act of documentation, news gathering and dissemination.

In the UAE, Federal Decree-Law No. 34 of 2021 on Combating Rumors and Cybercrimes makes it a criminal offense to publish or reshare content that contradicts official statements or is deemed likely to "incite public opinion." In Kuwait, the State Security Law provides for a minimum sentence of three years' imprisonment for spreading "rumors" that undermine national security. Kuwait also established in March 2026, the "State Security Crimes, Terrorism, and Financing Prosecution Office" and granted it jurisdiction to investigate cases that affect the state's entity, security and stability. In Qatar, a 2020 amendment to the Penal Code criminalizes resharing "rumors" with penalties of up to five years in prison, which can be doubled in wartime. In Saudi Arabia, Article 6 of the Anti-Cybercrime Law has been interpreted to treat footage of strikes or security incidents as content published in a manner likely to "disturb public order," punishable by up to five years in prison and fines of up to SAR 3 million. Similar provisions exist elsewhere in the region, giving authorities wide discretion to treat basic acts of documenting and sharing information as threats to state security.

Gulf governments have spent years building legal frameworks deliberately broad enough to capture any expression they find inconvenient, online and offline, and the current crackdown simply activates infrastructure that was already in place. As RSF notes, Gulf governments already rank among the worst in the world on the Press Freedom Index, and the current conflict has only tightened these restrictions further.

Under international human rights law (IHRL), these restrictions raise serious concerns. Article 19 of the ICCPR protects the right to seek, receive, and share information, including during conflict. International humanitarian law does not suspend international human rights law (PDF); both frameworks apply simultaneously and in a complementary manner, as the International Court of Justice has affirmed. Any permissible limitation on freedom of expression must satisfy a strict three-part test: it must be (1) prescribed by law with sufficient precision; (2) necessary to achieve a legitimate aim; and (3) proportionate to that aim. Blanket criminal prohibitions on civilian documentation, enforced with criminal penalties carrying sentences, fail each element of this test. They also leave victims of attacks without any means to evidence the harms they suffer, fundamentally undermining accountability. Civilian documentation has played a key, and increasingly important, role in legal accountability for war crimes and crimes against humanity.

These crackdowns also intersect with longstanding patterns of digital repression in the region. Gulf governments have deployed surveillance infrastructure, cybercrime laws, and social media monitoring not to protect civilians, but to protect state narratives. The arrests of civilians for documenting attacks on their own cities follow the same logic as the suppression of political dissent in peacetime: the goal is not public safety, but **information control.**

We, the undersigned, call on Gulf governments to:

1. Immediately release all individuals detained solely for filming, posting, sharing, or commenting on footage of the attacks, including journalists, human rights defenders, and civilians and drop all charges against them.
2. Ensure that any limitations on publishing or sharing information are clearly defined in law, strictly necessary to protect a legitimate aim, and proportionate in scope and penalty, in compliance with Article 19 of the ICCPR.
3. Uphold the right of freedom of expression and press freedom and refrain from unlawfully restricting it under the pretext of national security, public order, or national defence.
4. Reform or repeal all laws that criminalize legitimate expression, including overbroad and vague cybercrime, state security, and public order provisions that punish individuals for peaceful speech, sharing or resharing information, or communicating in private spaces.
5. Restore full rights of appeal in all security-related proceedings and disband special or expedited courts that deny defendants standard due process protections.

We also call on social media companies to:

1. Respect international human rights standards, including the right to freedom of expression and access to information, and ensure that company policies and practices are aligned with the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights.
2. Conduct thorough and transparent human rights due diligence before complying with government requests to restrict or remove accounts or online content, and refrain from enforcing requests that violate international freedom of expression standards.

Signatures:

- Access Now
- ALQST for Human Rights
- American Committee for Middle East Rights (ACMER)
- ARTICLE 19
- Associação Alternativa Terrazul (Brasil)
- Bolo Bhi
- Centre for Artificial Intelligence Ethics and Governance in Africa (CAIEGA)
- Centre for Independent Journalism (Malaysia)
- CITAD
- Committee to Protect Journalists
- Council for Responsible Social Media – Kenya
- DAWN
- De|Center

- Diaspora in Action for Human Rights and Democracy
- Digital Rights Nepal (DRN)
- Electronic Frontier Foundation (EFF)
- Global Voices
- HuMENA for Human Rights and Civic Engagement
- Index on Censorship
- Internet Governance Tanzania Working Group
- Kandoo
- Meedan
- PEN America
- Rinascimento Green
- Skyline International for Human Rights (SIHR)
- SMEX
- Tech & Media Convergency (TMC)
- The Legal Resources Centre

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