

High-Tech Tyranny in the Gulf: Biometric Technology Mandatory for All Citizens in the UAE

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As war continues to ravage many parts of the Middle East, Orwellian technology continues to make its presence more apparent. Israel uses biometric technology and now the Gulf States is following in the same direction. It was just announced that the United Arab Emirates (UAE) will mandate its citizenry to participate in “*biometric tests*” to obtain visas if they were to visit Saudi Arabia or any other country.

In a report by [www.emirates247.com](#) called ‘Saudi visa fee to rise as UAE residents set to undergo biometric tests soon’ we learn that “*All UAE residents going to Saudi Arabia for Hajj, Umrah or any other visit are expected to undergo biometrics tests very soon, an official said on Monday. Saudi Arabia’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MoFA) has designated Dubai-based VFS TasHeel International to launch biometrics pilot project for visa purposes in the UAE and other countries.*” The project is officially set to launch within a 3 to 6 month time period.

Raghu Athimoolam who is the Chief Operating Officer of VFS TasHeel International based in the UAE said that “*We’re meeting with the MoFA officials every week and it’s progressing very well. 80% of the work is done. Once it’s officially launched in the UAE, it’ll be mandatory for all residents – both Emiratis and expatriates – to have biometrics before travelling to Saudi Arabia for Hajj, Umrah, business or any other purpose,*” the report said.

As tyrannical as both Saudi Arabia and the UAE governments are towards their citizenry, this development is certainly troubling. VFS TasHeel has partnered with VFS Global which is based in London. “*VFS TasHeel is a joint venture between global visa processing firm VFS Global and TasHeel of Saudi Arabia. It currently has three offices in UAE – Dubai, Abu Dhabi and Sharjah – where 127 employees cater around 700 applicants on average every day.*” The report also stated that “*VFS TasHeel International has been mandated by Saudi to offer visas for business and commercial visits, education, escort, family, government meetings, medical purpose, merchandise delivery, personal visit and transit.*” It only means that for whatever reason you decide to visit Saudi Arabia you must be registered with the biometric system to enter the country. It was reported back on February 11th, 2013 that the UAE had the world’s largest biometric database. The report was conducted by [gulfnews.com](#) as it stated what the UAE has accomplished as an Orwellian state:

The UAE has built its national population register which is the world’s largest civil biometric database, a senior official said on Monday. “The UAE population register system, the world’s largest civil biometric database, was completed by the end of last year,” Dr Ali Al Khoury, director general of the Emirates Identity Authority, told the sixth ID World Abu Dhabi being held at the Emirates Centre for Strategic Studies and Research.

The two-day summit tackles the ICT challenges in modern society, bringing together high-level international government representatives and leading players in security, mobility and traceability.

Dr Al Khoury said on the sidelines of the World ID Summit that the UAE's biometric database had a total of around 140 million fingerprints, palm and hand prints, facial prints and digital signatures which belonged to citizens and residents from more than 206 nationalities, but declined to disclose the population census figure or whether any other official assessment of the country's population was accurate.

The detailed report by Gulf news describes what the UAE's purpose of the biometric system will be intended for:

Dr Al Khoury said it was anticipated that the database of inhabitants' biometrics will contribute and support projects related to the UAE's national vision 2021. "This is aimed at enhancing security and supporting e-government projects through authenticating personal identity in e-transactions conducted over the internet," he said.

The Emirates Identity Authority, Dr Al Khoury added, was founded in September 2004 and has completed this sophisticated population register system to provide unique identification and secured verification for every citizen or resident in UAE by giving them unique personal numbers linked to his/her biometric characteristics such as fingerprints.

"Having completed its digital infrastructure, the Emirates ID and 15 government authorities in six sectors, mainly education, health, labour, interior and justice have agreed on infrastructure necessary for e-linking. We plan to complete linking to the Interior Ministry and the Ministry of Justice during this year. It is also planned that the ID card replaces the e-signature card held by Public Relation Officers dealing with the Labour Ministry this year," Dr Al Khoury said.

He added the ID card was widely accepted by up to 200 authorities nowadays.

Dr Al Khoury said the newly used technology in the Population Register System helps use the latest methods of protecting data and information in addition to providing a safer environment to identify and verify the identity of the individual, achieve linkage and integration with the various government and semi- government authorities, provide statistical information in support of planning and decision-making, provide a solid infrastructure for the e-government project, upgrade and ease of the governmental services level and eliminate forgery.

The trend in biometric technology should be no surprise as the Monarchies of the Gulf States (who are also allies of Western governments including the US, UK and France) rule their populations with an iron fist becomes more difficult to maintain as the world witnessed in Bahrain, when the people protested against government oppression. The UAE has been accused of numerous human rights violations against migrant workers in the past and has restricted the freedom of speech among its citizens. RT News reported in 2012 the UAE imposed internet restrictions on its citizens fearing an Arab uprising in their own backyard. According to RT News:

The Arab uprisings that swept the Middle East largely bypassed the Persian Gulf's

authoritarian regimes; the UAE in particular has not seen any street protests since the social unrest began over a year ago. But the crackdowns on internet freedoms in several countries in the Gulf betray concern that their regimes may go through a similar social upheaval.

Under the guise of a probe into foreign-linked groups planning “crimes against the security of the state,” the UAE’s authorities have detained around 60 Islamist dissidents since the beginning of the year.

Back in August the UAE’s Minister for Foreign Affairs Anwar Gargash slammed criticism against the measures, condemning them as attempts to slander UAE “with very little reference to our many achievements.”

The UAE along with Saudi Arabia and Bahrain remain virtually untouched by Western government criticism of their authoritarian regimes and measures restricting freedom of expression. Social networking sites and forums have become a new platform for citizens in these countries to voice opinions on their rulers.

The UAE also tortures prisoners according to Reprieve; a human rights charity organization based in the UK who reported that 75% of prisoners in the UAE are systematically tortured by the police. Although Women in the UAE have access to education and health services, foreign female domestic workers are often trafficked and abused. Women are also at risk of being imprisoned for adultery when reporting sexual violence to local authorities.

Saudi Arabia is also known as a human rights violator as its leadership rules as an “Absolute Monarchy”. Saudi Arabia is one of the worst human rights violators in the world where it uses torture to obtain admissions of guilt from suspected criminals or those who criticize the Monarchy. Saudi Arabia also uses “corporal punishment” where local courts order “floggings” that consists of hundreds of lashes, sometimes even thousands that is inflicted upon those who are convicted. Women may be “flogged” as well. It has been reported in the past that hundreds of these flogging sentences are imposed every week without any publicity. Women are constantly discriminated under the religious and political program called the “Guardianship System”. The basis of the “Guardianship System” is that women may not be involved in politics and certain professions. Women cannot travel without a male and certain “medical procedures” cannot be done unless a male is present and “authorizes” it. Violence against women is prevalent since domestic violence laws are not enforced.

Biometric technology gives the ruling monarchies an advantage to spy on its citizens and those who are just visiting the country for business or are just vacationing with their families. It opens the door for other countries with human rights violations in the Middle East to follow in the same footsteps as in the case of the UAE. The biometric technology is already expanding into Egypt as Raghu Athimoolam, of VFS TasHeel International reportedly said to Emirates 247 “*He said the company is planning to open offices in Egypt this year. VFS TasHeel has been mandated by Saudi Arabia’s MoFA to process visa applications in 33 countries.*” The Electronic Frontier Foundation (EFF) says that biometrics causes numerous concerns regarding privacy and how governments such as the UAE and Saudi Arabia can use the technology to monitor and control their populations:

Biometrics’ biggest risk to privacy comes from the government’s ability to use it for surveillance. As face recognition technologies become more effective and cameras are capable of recording greater and greater detail, surreptitious identification and tracking

could become the norm.

The problems are multiplied when biometrics databases are “multimodal,” allowing the collection and storage of several different biometrics in one database and combining them with traditional data points like name, address, social security number, gender, race, and date of birth. Further, geolocation tracking technologies built on top of large biometrics collections could enable constant surveillance. And if the government gets its way, all of this data could be obtained without a warrant and without notice or warning.

Biometric technology will be used to locate dissidents and migrant workers (who protest against harsh working conditions) who oppose the ruling dictatorship. It is what George Orwell warned us about more than 50 years ago. Biometric technology would be imposed on the people through corrupt governments like those in the Gulf States. The UAE and Saudi Arabia are perfect examples of what new technologies can be used for. It's a very scary world indeed.

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