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AI in the UAE: Understanding the Regulatory Landscape and Key Authorities

As the UAE's AI regulatory framework continues to evolve, stakeholders should monitor legislative developments to ensure compliance and leverage opportunities for innovation.

Artificial intelligence (AI) plays a pivotal role in shaping laws and enforcement across the United Arab Emirates (UAE), with authorities emphasising ethical AI practices and compliance. This article explores the legal landscape governing AI in the UAE, highlighting strategic frameworks, sector-specific guidelines, the roles of various AI authorities in fostering innovation and ensuring responsible AI development, and UAE initiatives to enhance AI use.

Background

The UAE has federal laws that generally apply across its territory. However, each of the seven emirates of the UAE (Abu Dhabi, Ajman, Dubai, Fujairah, Ras Al Khaimah, Sharjah, and Umm Al-Quwain) is governed by its own set of Emirati laws. Businesses operating within an emirate are considered onshore and must adhere to both federal and emirate-specific regulations.

Additionally, the UAE hosts free zones that are distinct from onshore areas and offer tailored regulatory environments to support specific sectors and attract international business. Examples of free zones include: the Dubai International Financial Centre (DIFC), Abu Dhabi Global Markets (ADGM), Dubai Internet City (DIC), Dubai Silicon Oasis (DSO), and Sharjah Research, Technology, and Innovation Park (SRTI Park).

Although public policy legislation applies in free zones, these zones generally offer unique rules and exemptions for conducting business to foster foreign investment and specialised development. Many free zones provide licences or special regulations for specific projects, including those involving AI, alongside documentary and tax benefits. For example, DIFC [launched](#) a specific AI licence to provide AI developers and entrepreneurs with enhanced flexibility, cost benefits, and opportunities for growth within its dynamic technology and innovation ecosystem.

The UAE also operates sandboxes to assist specific types of businesses. These include the [Information and Communications Technology \(ICT\) Regulatory Sandbox](#), which provides a controlled environment for testing ICT solutions to foster innovation while ensuring compliance with UAE standards.

AI Laws and Regulations

The UAE engages in global discussions on AI governance and has entered international platforms to align its practices with global norms. Notably, the UAE adopted [UNESCO's AI Ethics Recommendation](#).

The UAE has implemented a set of laws and regulations to foster innovation while ensuring ethical and responsible AI development. These laws and regulations not only support the integration of AI across sectors, but also provide a framework for emerging technologies to thrive.

Strategic Frameworks for AI Development

The UAE has been proactive in issuing materials to support the development and implementation of AI across sectors. These [resources](#) are designed to help stakeholders understand the opportunities and risks associated with AI through insights and practical guidance, and to underscore the UAE's dedication to fostering a robust AI ecosystem. Adherence to the standards is specified as a priority of enforcement under the [UAE's International Stance on Artificial Intelligence Policy](#). Key publications include:

- **UAE National Strategy for Artificial Intelligence 2031:** Launched in October 2017, this [strategy](#) aims to transform the UAE into a global AI leader by 2031, integrating AI across sectors such as healthcare, education, transport, energy, and government services. With dedicated leadership, international partnerships, and sector-wide integration, the UAE aims to not only enhance public service efficiency and economic growth, but also shape global norms for responsible and impactful AI deployment.
- **The UAE Charter for the Development and Use of Artificial Intelligence:** This non-binding [charter](#), issued in June 2024, supports the AI Strategy 2031 and outlines 12 ethical principles — strengthening human-machine ties, safety, algorithmic bias mitigation, data privacy, transparency, human oversight, governance and accountability, technological excellence, human commitment, peaceful coexistence with AI, inclusive access, and compliance with applicable laws and treaties.
- **100 Practical Applications and Use Cases of Generative AI in Media:** This [guide](#), published in September 2023, explores more than 100 use cases of generative AI. While this guide does not impose legal obligations, it impacts policymaking, regulatory focus, and public procurement.
- **AI Ethics Guide:** Issued by the UAE's AI Office in December 2022, this [guide](#) sets out key ethical principles for the responsible development and use of AI, including fairness, transparency, accountability, privacy, and safety. It serves as a non-binding framework to help developers and organisations align AI systems with societal values, and it complements international standards like UNESCO's AI ethics recommendation.
- **AI Ethics Principles & Guidelines:** Some materials, such as [Digital Dubai's AI Ethics](#), are published by individual emirates. These principles and guidelines cover fairness, transparency, accountability, security, privacy, and sustainability.

- **Guidelines for Financial Institutions Adopting Enabling Technologies:** Authorities often publish materials in cooperation. These non-binding [guidelines](#) are adopted by key UAE financial regulators, including the UAE Central Bank (CBUAE), the UAE Securities and Commodities Authority (SCA), DIFC's Dubai Financial Services Authority (DFSA), and ADGM's Financial Services Regulatory Authority (FSRA).

Regulatory Flexibility for Innovation

Beyond AI-specific regulations, several other legal frameworks in the UAE are relevant to the development, deployment, and use of AI technologies.

- While the UAE does not have a separate intellectual property (IP) law for AI, the UAE's extensive IP legislation applies to the ownership and protection of AI algorithms, input, and output. Notably, [Federal Decree-Law No. \(38\) of 2021 on Copyright and Neighboring Rights](#) and its Implementing Regulation (Cabinet Decision No. 47/2022) play a crucial role in governing the use of third-party IP, which is often integral to AI systems that rely on vast datasets and pre-existing content.
- [Federal Decree by Law No. \(45\) of 2021 Concerning the Protection of Personal Data](#) is essential for AI applications, as it requires the lawful processing of personal data and the implementation of content filters to prevent the generation of unlawful outputs.
- [Federal Decree-Law No. \(34\) of 2021 on Countering Rumors and Cybercrimes](#) mandates that IT systems (which would cover AI) prevent the spread of false information and rumours, and requires technologies to incorporate robust cybersecurity measures to protect against unauthorised access and misuse.
- [Federal Decree Law No. \(5\) of 1985 Concerning the Issue of the Civil Transactions Law](#) establishes liability for harm caused by negligence, which could potentially apply to AI systems whose design or oversight is deemed negligent.
- [Federal Decree Law No. \(25\) of 2018 on the Projects of Future Nature](#) authorises the UAE Cabinet to grant interim licences and temporary exemptions under federal law for innovative projects — particularly those involving emerging technologies or AI — that lack existing regulation. This mechanism enables pilot and R&D initiatives to proceed while bespoke legislation is being drafted.
- Emirates and free zones frequently issue laws pertinent to AI. For instance, the amendments to the [DIFC Data Protection Regulations](#) focus on AI systems and their impact on personal data processing. These amendments emphasise the importance of AI while addressing associated risks, requiring companies to implement robust measures to protect personal data. The amendments also cover data use in digital and communications services, mandating clear disclosures and privacy-focused settings to ensure compliance with evolving AI technologies.

Collectively, these legal frameworks ensure that AI technologies are developed and used in a manner that respects IP rights and protects personal data.

Sector-Specific Guidelines

The UAE has developed sector-specific laws and guidelines that are highly relevant to the integration and regulation of AI across industries. These instruments aim to ensure the ethical, safe, and effective use of AI technologies while aligning with international standards and promoting innovation.

- The previously referenced [Guidelines for Financial Institutions Adopting Enabling Technologies](#) cover AI, big data analytics, biometrics, cloud computing, APIs, and distributed ledger technologies. These guidelines require institutions to establish governance frameworks, ensure accountability by senior management, design reliable and explainable AI models, regularly monitor and audit applications, assess materiality and risk, and maintain transparency with customers through clear disclosures and redress mechanisms.
- Dubai Health Authority's [Artificial Intelligence Policy in Healthcare](#) sets out clear regulatory requirements to ensure the safe, ethical, and effective use of AI technologies. The policy mandates compliance with international, federal, and Dubai-specific data protection and medical standards. It emphasises principles such as patient safety, transparency, accountability, privacy, and human oversight. AI systems must support — not replace — clinical decision-making and must undergo independent validation, risk assessment, and clear disclosure of functionality.
- [Dubai's Regulation of Autonomous Vehicles – Law No. \(9\) of 2023](#) applies throughout the emirate, including free zones, and prohibits any autonomous vehicle from operating on Dubai roads without a licence from the Roads and Transport Authority (RTA). The RTA can define vehicle categories, approve and review safety and performance standards, determine permitted routes, develop supporting infrastructure, and conduct technical inspections. Operators and agents are subject to specific obligations, including vehicle maintenance, system compatibility, and provision of safety instructions to passengers, and can be liable for damages caused.

UAE AI Authorities

The UAE has established a multi-tiered governance structure to oversee the development and deployment of AI. This structure is led at a federal level by the [AI Office](#), which provides strategic direction and coordinates national initiatives across government, digital infrastructure, and innovation.

The [UAE Council for Artificial Intelligence and Blockchain](#), established in February 2018, promotes cross-sector AI adoption, advises on ethical and governance standards, and fosters coordination on issues such as data security, digital trust, and responsible innovation.

The [Telecommunications and Digital Government Regulatory Authority](#) (TDRA) plays a critical national role in overseeing the UAE's digital environment, setting ICT policy, and ensuring that AI implementations — such as the adoption of generative AI tools on government portals — align with federal digital strategy and standards.

At the Emirati level, Law No. (3) of 2024, issued in January 2024, formally established the [Artificial Intelligence and Advanced Technology Council](#) (the AIATC) in Abu Dhabi. The AIATC is tasked with regulating and overseeing AI and advanced technology projects, research, infrastructure, and investment within the emirate — part of Abu Dhabi's strategy to become a global AI hub. While Abu Dhabi currently provides the clearest example of an emirate-level AI council established by law, other emirates may adopt similar governance structures in the future.

Meanwhile, some free zones, such as the DIFC and ADGM financial free zones, manage AI deployment in the financial sector through their independent legal frameworks.

AI-related activities in the UAE may necessitate obtaining licences and authorisations from various UAE authorities. For instance, a licence from the [UAE Media Regulatory Office Department of Health](#) could be needed for developing AI technologies. Further, health-related AI applications that are deployed within Abu Dhabi's regulated health sector or process Abu Dhabi patient data require authorisation from the Abu Dhabi Department of Health.

UAE AI Initiatives

The UAE is incorporating AI into its central governance functions, particularly within the legislative process, through the establishment of an [AI-supported Regulatory Intelligence Office](#). This initiative is designed to transform lawmaking by accelerating the legislative process, enhancing accuracy, and ensuring real-time alignment with national priorities. The initiatives also include AI-native Abu Dhabi government across all digital services by 2027.

Beyond governance, AI is being deployed across sectors to drive innovation and efficiency. In healthcare, AI-powered diagnostic tools and clinical decision support systems are improving patient outcomes. These tools and support systems are integrated within national strategies led by health authorities such as the [Ministry of Health and Prevention](#).

In transportation, Dubai's RTA launched its [Artificial Intelligence Strategy 2030](#), aiming to enhance global leadership in AI-driven mobility through an integrated ecosystem that improves quality of life in Dubai. The strategy includes 81 projects across six strategic pillars, focusing on enhancing operational efficiency, reducing travel time, and increasing productivity, while also establishing a robust governance framework for AI and leveraging big data to drive innovation and improve customer satisfaction.

Next Steps

As the UAE continues to refine its AI regulatory framework, stakeholders should monitor legislative developments to ensure compliance and leverage opportunities for innovation. Businesses are encouraged to monitor regulatory updates from key authorities such as the AI Office, TDRA, and financial free zones like DIFC and ADGM.

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