

Cyber Crime Prevention Law in Qatar

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Qatar has high levels of internet connectivity, with 96% of households now connected to the internet, a six-point jump since last year, according to a new report from the UN Broadband Commission.

This means Qatar retains its rank as second place among 132 developing countries in terms of online connectivity. We are seeing a spike in legitimate digital content services and solutions, not only from the incumbent companies, but also from innovative start-ups, both working through the internet. However with this increase in internet use comes increased cybercrime.

On 16 September 2014 the Qatari government promulgated a cybercrime prevention law (No.14 of 2014) in an effort to increase the tools for combating online and cyber crimes. The new law imposes many sanctions and several penalties for offences committed through the Internet, IT networks, computers and other related crimes. The legislation is aimed at safeguarding the country's technological infrastructure and strengthening cyber security within Qatar. The law took immediate effect but it will be posted in the Official Gazette to comply with formalities.

During the drafting of the legislation there was considerable criticism surrounded it as many viewed some parts of the legislation as threatening freedom of speech and access to media.

The law contains the following provisions, amongst others:

1. The law stipulates a 10 year jail term and a fine of up to QR 200,000 for forging any official e-document, or a three year jail term or a fine of a maximum of QR 100,000 if the document forged is unofficial. Similar punishments await those who impersonate individuals or entities, or are involved in identity theft or steal movable property using the Internet.
2. Provisions on so-called "content crimes" that make it illegal to publish "false news". These terms are not defined, making it unclear what content would land local journalists and social media users in trouble. Therefore news agencies, social media users and journalists must be careful to verify the source of the news before broadcasting it to the public in order to avoid contravening the law.
3. A jail term of up to three years and a fine of up to QR 200,000 for unauthorized possession or use of e-card, whether it is an ATM or credit card, or stealing numbers or forging e-cards.
4. A jail term of up to three years and a fine of up to 500,000 Qatari riyals for the breach of intellectual property rights by using the internet article 13), be it copyrights, patents, trade secrets, trademarks, trade names, geographical indications and industrial designs, or designs of integrated circuits.

As reported in a study conducted by the 2014 Global Economic Crime Survey by Price Waterhouse Cooper, cybercrimes are the second most common form of economic crime reported in the Middle East. As such businesses operating in the region are at high risk. Despite the concerns raised about the new Cybercrimes law when it was in the drafting stages, it is undeniable that Qatar along with the UAE has taken the lead in addressing the issues related to cybercrime and has implemented penalties and jail terms for those who contravene to the law.