

UNITED ARAB EMIRATES 2014 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution guarantees freedom of worship and states all persons are equal before the law without discrimination regarding religious belief. The law prohibits blasphemy, proselytizing by non-Muslims, and conversion from Islam. Internet service providers blocked access to certain websites on non-Sunni Muslim belief systems or those that criticized Islam. Christian churches and Hindu and Sikh temples operated on land donated by the ruling families; however, overcrowding remained a problem. Other minority religious groups conducted religious ceremonies in private homes without interference. Coptic Pope Tawadros II visited in March for a discussion on interfaith dialogue and principles of tolerance. In Abu Dhabi in March, the minister of foreign affairs presided over a conference centered on peaceful coexistence in Muslim societies.

Within society there was tolerance for non-Muslims, including for holiday celebrations and traditions, although there was pressure discouraging conversion from Islam. There were reports of anti-Semitic materials available at some book fairs. The Abu Dhabi Book Fair organizers removed several vendors for selling inappropriate materials, including some material deemed to be anti-Semitic or supportive of extremist interpretations of Islam.

The U.S. Ambassador and embassy and consulate general officers engaged federal and emirate-level government officials to advocate for religious tolerance and freedom, expressing support for government policies that encourage tolerance of non-Muslims. In interactions with the government, the embassy encouraged officials to maintain openness to religious diversity while continuing efforts to counter violent extremism. U.S. officials discussed the importance of religious tolerance and respect for the plurality of religious traditions during embassy- and consulate general-hosted iftars and a large Ramadan event hosted by the Ambassador.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population is 5.65 million (July 2014 estimate), based on the results of the 2005 census. The UN estimates the total population is 9.4 million (July 2014 estimate).

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An estimated 89 percent of residents are noncitizens. More than 85 percent of citizens are Sunni Muslims, and an estimated 15 percent or fewer are Shia Muslims. Shia Muslims are concentrated in the emirates of Dubai and Sharjah.

Noncitizen residents predominantly come from South and Southeast Asia, although there are substantial numbers from the Middle East, Europe, Central Asia, and North America. According to a 2005 Ministry of Economy census, 76 percent of the total population is Muslim, 9 percent is Christian, and 15 percent belongs to other religious groups, primarily Hindu or Buddhist. Groups together constituting less than 5 percent of the population include Parsis, Bahais, Druze, Sikhs, Ahmadis, Ismailis, Dawoodi Bohra Muslims, and Jews. These estimates differ from official census figures because they do not take into account the many temporary visitors and workers, and categorize Bahais and Druze as Muslim. Although no official statistics are available for the respective populations of non-citizen Sunni and Shia Muslims, media estimates indicate that up to 20 percent of the non-citizen Muslim population is Shia.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution guarantees the “freedom to exercise religious worship...in accordance with established customs, provided that it does not conflict with public policy or violate public morals.” The constitution declares Islam is the official religion of all seven constituent emirates of the federal union and defines all citizens as Muslims. The constitution stipulates that all citizens are equal before the law, without discrimination between citizens on grounds of religious belief. The law denies Muslims the freedom to change religion.

Conversion from Islam to another religion is not recognized, and no data is available detailing the number of conversions. The legal punishment for conversion from Islam is death, although there are no known prosecutions or legal punishments for apostasy.

The law prohibits black magic, sorcery, and incantations, which are punishable by a prison term ranging from six months to three years and deportation.

The law prohibits blasphemy. Offenders are subject to fines and imprisonment. Noncitizens may be deported. The law provides penalties for using the internet to

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preach against Islam, proselytize Muslims, “abuse” a holy shrine or ritual of any religion, insult any religion, and incite someone to commit sin or contravene national values.

The government prohibits proselytizing by followers of any religion other than Islam and prohibits the distribution of non-Islamic religious literature under penalty of criminal prosecution, imprisonment, and deportation. The government sometimes threatens to revoke the residence permits of noncitizens suspected of proselytizing for a religion other than Islam.

The judicial system applies two types of law, depending on the case. Courts apply sharia for most family law matters, e.g., marriage, divorce, and inheritance, and certain criminal matters. Courts apply civil law, based on the French and Egyptian legal systems, for all other matters. Shia Muslims in Dubai may pursue Shia family law cases through a special Shia council rather than the regular judicial system. When Islamic law courts try non-Muslims for criminal offenses, judges have the discretion to impose civil or sharia penalties, though they generally impose civil penalties. Higher courts may overturn or modify sharia penalties.

The law prohibits churches from erecting bell towers or displaying crosses on the outside of their premises. The government does not always enforce this law, however, and some churches display crosses on their buildings.

Islamic studies are mandatory in public schools and in private schools serving Muslim children; the government does not permit instruction in any religion other than Islam in public schools. Private parochial schools, however, are free to teach their religion and practice religious rituals within the bounds of government guidelines. Private schools found to be teaching subjects that offend Islam, defame any religion, or contravene the country’s ethics and beliefs face potential penalties, including closure. All schools, regardless of religious affiliation, must register with the government.

Under sharia as applied by the government, Muslim men may marry non-Muslim women who are “people of the book,” generally meaning those who are either Christian or Jewish. Muslim women are not permitted to marry non-Muslim men. Since marriages between non-Muslim men and Muslim women are considered invalid, parties to such a union are subject to arrest, trial, and imprisonment on grounds of engaging in extra-marital sex, which carries a minimum sentence of one year in jail. In the event of a divorce between a Muslim father and non-Muslim

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mother, the law grants child custody to the Muslim father. Non-Muslim wives of citizens are also ineligible for naturalization, and cannot inherit their husbands' property unless named as a beneficiary in his will.

The law requires Muslims and non-Muslims to refrain from eating, drinking, and smoking in public during fasting hours in the month of Ramadan.

Government Practices

The government favored Islam – the state religion – over other faiths but promoted religious tolerance as government policy. There were reports of arrests for practicing sorcery, and internet service providers blocked access to certain websites on non-Sunni Muslim belief systems or those that criticized Islam. Churches and temples operated on land donated by the ruling families; however, overcrowding remained a problem.

According to media reports, the government arrested individuals for the practice of sorcery, usually in connection with allegations of fraud. According to English-language daily Gulf News, Dubai police arrested two Arab men accused of convincing women that they could solve their marital problems by practicing sorcery and of charging fraudulent fees for their service.

Customs authorities routinely reviewed the content of religious materials imported into the country.

The country's two primary internet service providers blocked certain web sites containing religious information, including sites with information on the Bahai Faith, Judaism, atheism, negative critiques of Islam, and testimonies of former Muslims who converted to Christianity.

The government favored Islam over other religious groups and supported Islamic institutions and programs facilitating conversion to Islam. The government funded or subsidized almost 95 percent of the approximately 5,000 Sunni mosques, and all Sunni imams were government employees. The government considered the remaining 5 percent of Sunni mosques private. Several mosques had large private endowments.

The General Authority of Islamic Affairs and Endowments (Awqaf) oversaw most issues related to Islamic affairs, including administering Sunni mosques and

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providing some guidance to Shia mosques. It distributed weekly guidance to most Sunni imams regarding subject matter, themes, and content of the weekly Friday Islamic sermons; published a Friday sermon script every week; and posted the guidance online on the Awqaf's website. It also ensured that junior clergy did not deviate frequently or significantly from the approved sermons. The Awqaf continued a three-tier system in which junior imams followed the Awqaf Friday sermon script closely; mid-level imams prepared sermons according to the topic or subject matter selected by Awqaf authorities; and senior imams had the flexibility to choose their own subject and content for their Friday sermons. The Awqaf encouraged "improvisation of speeches" under these guidelines with the constraint that the speech was not to exceed 30 minutes. The advisor to the president on judicial and religious affairs, as well as the Awqaf's chairman, and its director general, regularly represented the country at Islamic, multi-faith, and Christian-hosted interfaith conferences and events abroad. They also met regularly with religious leaders in the country.

The Awqaf appointed Sunni imams, except in Dubai, but did not appoint sheikhs (religious leaders) for Shia mosques. Dubai's Islamic Affairs and Charitable Activities Department (emirate-level Awqaf) controlled the appointment of Sunni clergy and their conduct during worship in Dubai mosques.

Some Shia sheikhs followed Awqaf-approved weekly addresses, while other Shia sheikhs wrote their own sermons. Shia Muslims had their own council, the Jaafari Waqf Charity Council, to manage Shia affairs. Shia adherents worshiped in and maintained their own mosques. Officially, the government considered all Shia mosques private, and they were able to receive funds from the government upon request. The government permitted Shia Muslims to observe Ashura in private. Restrictions that limit all types of public gatherings, however, barred public processions. Shia mosques were allowed to broadcast the Shia version of the call to prayer from their minarets.

The government encouraged citizens to avoid practices and ideologies it considered extremist. Government leaders issued public statements condemning extremist activities on multiple occasions. Religious authorities coordinated public awareness campaigns about the dangers of violent extremism with advertisements and television commercials. The government also prohibited the publication and distribution of literature it believed promoted extremist Islam and overtly political Islam. The government continued to support Hedayah, an international center of excellence for countering violent extremism. Hedayah, guided by an international

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steering board, conducted training and roundtables to increase countering violent extremism (CVE) capacity and promote tolerance in the region. On December 9-11, together with the Global Counterterrorism Forum, Hedayah hosted a CVE Communications Exposition, bringing together approximately 250 governmental and non-governmental experts, to generate new ideas and programs and to leverage new technologies for countering extremist narratives and promoting tolerance.

The government supported a training program in Afghanistan for more than 15,000 imams in collaboration with the Afghan government. The training program aimed to encourage tolerance and build local capacity to address social and religious issues.

Immigration authorities routinely asked foreigners applying for residence permits to declare their religious affiliation on residence applications. Ministry of Interior officials stated that the government collected religious affiliation information for demographic statistical analysis only.

The government did not require religious groups to register. Since land ownership was typically limited to citizens, non-citizen Muslims and non-Muslims could request from local rulers land grants and permission to build houses of worship. For non-Muslim and Muslim minority groups, such land titles remained in the respective ruler's name. The government granted permission to build houses of worship on a case-by-case basis when congregations outgrew smaller, private facilities. Those with land grants did not pay rent on the property. Several emirates also waived utility payments for religious buildings. Rulers of the individual emirates exercised autonomy in choosing whether to grant access to land and permission to build houses of worship within their emirates. Some religious leaders stated the government was more likely to grant access to land to groups representing monotheistic religions. Some religious groups reportedly refrained from requesting land because of political sensitivities.

Although the government approved some permits for new buildings, existing churches could not accommodate all worshippers. This resulted in overcrowding at some churches, and, on occasion, forced congregations to meet in private clubs and meetinghouses, private residences, hotels, open courtyards, and other non-religious rental facilities. In March a new extension of St. Martin's Anglican Church in Sharjah officially opened on land that the Ruler of Sharjah donated, to accommodate an increased number of attendees. In December a new Armenian

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church opened in Abu Dhabi on land donated by the Crown Prince and Deputy Supreme Commander of the Armed Forces Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed.

There were over 35 Christian churches in the country built on land donated by the ruling families of the emirates in which they are located, including houses of worship for the Catholic, Coptic Orthodox, and the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormon) communities.

There were no synagogues for the small foreign resident Jewish population. The Jewish community, however, observed holidays and ceremonies in private residences without interference.

Two Hindu temples and one Sikh temple operated in Dubai. There were no Buddhist temples, but the Sri Lankan embassy held monthly religious services open to the public. Buddhists, Hindus, and Sikhs conducted religious ceremonies in private homes without interference.

The government permitted non-Muslim groups to raise money from their congregations and from abroad. Due to government restrictions on charitable giving, some Muslim and non-Muslim groups had difficulty spending the funds they raised. Religious groups openly advertised religious functions in the press, including holiday celebrations, memorial services, religious conventions, choral concerts, and fundraising events. The government also allowed businesses to openly advertise, sell merchandise, and host events for non-Muslim holidays such as Christmas, Easter, and Diwali.

Christian primary and secondary schools, in which students were free to study Christianity and perform religious rituals, were located in four emirates.

The government provided land for non-Muslim cemeteries. There were four operating cremation facilities and associated cemeteries for the large Hindu community, one each in Abu Dhabi, Al Ain, Dubai, and Sharjah, and the Hindu community reported that these were sufficient to meet present demand. The government required residents and non-residents to obtain official permission for the use of cremation facilities in every instance, and authorities routinely granted such permission. The government allowed people from all religious groups except Islam to use the cremation facilities.

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The government welcomed Coptic Pope Tawadros II to the country in March. UAE official news agency WAM reported that the vice president (who is also the UAE Prime Minister and ruler of Dubai) met with the pope to discuss interfaith dialogue and principles of tolerance.

In Abu Dhabi in March the minister of foreign affairs presided over a conference centered on peaceful coexistence in Muslim societies. The event brought over 250 of the world's leading Islamic scholars together to discuss sectarianism and ideological differences. At the conference, the government announced its plan to create a Muslim Council of Elders intended to highlight tolerance within Islam and counter extremist ideologies. The government formally established the council in July.

Government officials condemned attacks by violent Islamist extremist groups, arguing they did not represent Sunni Islam and should not be referred to as Islamic.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Within society there was tolerance for non-Muslims, although there was pressure discouraging conversion away from Islam. Some non-Muslim women faced societal pressure to convert to Islam upon marriage to a Muslim. Society viewed conversion to Islam positively.

Certain larger churches allowed Christian denominations lacking their own churches to use their facilities.

There were reports of anti-Semitic materials available at some book fairs. The Abu Dhabi Book Fair organizers removed several vendors for selling inappropriate materials, including, some material deemed to be anti-Semitic or supportive of extremist interpretations of Islam.

Holiday foods, decorations, posters, and books were widely available during Christian holidays, and Christmas trees and elaborate decorations were prominent features at major malls and hotels. The news media regularly printed reports of religious holiday celebrations, including church services and Hindu festivals.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

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The U.S. Ambassador met regularly with the presidential advisor on religious and judicial affairs, and embassy and consulate general officers met with government officials to discuss religious tolerance and freedom. In these discussions, embassy officials encouraged the government to maintain openness to religious diversity while continuing efforts to counter violent extremism. Consulate general officers met with the director general and other officials from the Dubai Department of Islamic Affairs and Charitable Activities (Dubai's emirate-level department of Awqaf), and expressed support for the government's efforts to promote religious tolerance. U.S. officials discussed the importance of religious tolerance and respect for the plurality of religious traditions during embassy- and consulate general-hosted iftars and a large *sohour* event hosted by the Ambassador.

Embassy and consulate general officers also met with representatives of minority religious communities to discuss their freedom to worship and government support for religious freedom.