

# UNITED ARAB EMIRATES 2023 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

## Executive Summary

The constitution states that Islam is the country's official religion. It provides for freedom of worship if it does not conflict with public policy or morals. It states all persons are equal before the law and prohibits discrimination on grounds of religious belief. According to the constitution, sharia is the principal source of legislation, although the judicial system applies both sharia and civil law, depending on the case. The penal code and electronic crimes law contain prohibitions on blasphemy, proselytizing by non-Muslims, and acts the government interprets as provoking religious hatred, discrimination, or insulting religions.

A new federal law that took effect in November prohibits all forms of proselytization and expands blasphemy provisions from previous legislation, prohibiting the denigration of the tenets of any religion recognized by the government as opposed to only Abrahamic faiths. It also forbids inciting religious, racial, and ethnic tensions and any undertaking viewed by the state as undermining public order. Beginning November 30, federal law expands the requirement for non-Muslim religious groups to obtain licenses for their houses of worship and places them under the purview of the federal Ministry of Community Development. The law retains the authority of each emirate-level regulator to license and oversee houses of worship in their respective jurisdictions. The federal government had not promulgated the law's implementing regulations by year's end.

The government, having designated the Muslim Brotherhood as a terrorist organization in 2014, continued to restrict the activities of organizations and individuals allegedly associated with al-Islah, a Muslim Brotherhood affiliate. Ahmed Mansoor, a human rights activist who, according to Human Rights Watch, has been in prison since 2017 for advocating political inclusion, was accused by the government of promoting “a sectarian and hate-filled agenda.” According to an international human rights organization, at least 62 political detainees remained in detention after completing their sentences, including Mohammed al-Roken, a human rights lawyer arrested in 2012 and sentenced to 10 years in prison for his defense of alleged members of al-Islah. On December 7, the Public Prosecution referred 84 defendants to the Abu Dhabi Federal State Security Court of Appeal on charges of establishing a clandestine organization to commit acts of violence and terrorism in the country, stating that the defendants were mostly members of the Muslim Brotherhood. Among the defendants were individuals already imprisoned on other convictions or in government custody based on political activities, including Mansoor, al-Roken, and Khalaf al-Rumaithi. Representatives of non-Islamic faiths said registration and licensing procedures and requirements for minority religious groups remained unclear in all emirates. The government continued to permit Shia Muslims to observe Ashura in private but not in public.

In January, the government announced it would begin teaching about the Holocaust in history classes in primary and secondary schools, becoming the first Arab nation to do so, in the 2023-24 school year. In February, Abu Dhabi inaugurated the government-sponsored Abrahamic Family House, with a mosque, a church, and the country’s first purposely built synagogue located on one site and representing the three Abrahamic faiths.

According to non-Muslim religious community representatives, there was a high degree of societal tolerance for minority religious beliefs and traditions, particularly for those associated with houses of worship officially recognized by the federal or local emirate governments. Although conversion from Islam was strongly discouraged, conversion to Islam was encouraged. In some cases, organizations reported that hotels, citing government regulatory barriers, were unwilling to rent space for non-Islamic religious purposes, such as weekly church services. Jewish community leaders reported a rise in antisemitic incidents on social media and in schools following the October 7 Hamas attacks. Jewish community leaders said religious services open to the public in Dubai were suspended as of October 7 out of an abundance of caution. Services in Abu Dhabi continued to be held at the Abrahamic Family House synagogue, although-community members noted a sharp decrease in attendance.

The Secretary of State visited the Abrahamic Family House on October 14 and subsequently discussed his visit with the UAE President. The Ambassador, visiting U.S. government officials, and embassy and consulate general officers engaged government officials throughout the year on efforts to support religious diversity, inclusiveness, and tolerance and discussed licensing procedures and regulatory practices involving religious and religiously affiliated groups. To mark International Holocaust Remembrance Day in January, the embassy supported an event organized by the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum and Zayed University that featured a Holocaust survivor. During the year, the Ambassador, visiting senior U.S. government officials, and other embassy and consulate general officers met regularly with representatives of religious organizations and other groups associated with minority religious communities, including Christian church leaders, Sikh and Hindu community leaders, Jewish community representatives, and the Baha'i and Bohra Muslim communities. Embassy

and consulate general officers also met with Islamic organizations and discussed the promotion of religious tolerance and emphasized the U.S. government's commitment to religious freedom. The then Chargé d'Affaires attended the inauguration of the Abrahamic Family House in February along with other embassy personnel in addition to visiting the construction site of Abu Dhabi's Hindu temple in June and meeting leaders of the Hindu community.

## **Section I. Religious Demography**

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 9.9 million (midyear 2023). Approximately 11 percent are citizens, of whom more than 85 percent are Sunni Muslims, according to media reports. Most of the remainder of the citizens are Shia Muslims, who are concentrated in the Emirates of Dubai and Sharjah.

Of the estimated 89 percent of noncitizen residents, the majority comes from South and Southeast Asia. Although no official statistics are available on the percentage of the noncitizen Muslim population or the breakdown between Sunni and Shia Muslims, media estimates suggest that less than 20 percent of the noncitizen Muslim population is Shia.

Of the total population (both citizen and noncitizen), the most recent census, which took place in 2005, found 76 percent of the population to be Muslim, 9 percent Christian, and 15 percent from other non-Muslim religious groups, comprising mainly Hindus and Buddhists and including Zoroastrians, Baha'is, Druze, Sikhs, and Jews. Ahmadi Muslims, Ismaili Muslims, and Dawoodi Bohra Muslims together constitute less than 5 percent of the total population and are almost entirely noncitizens. The Pew Research Center estimated in 2010 that 76.9 percent of the total

population was Muslim, 12.6 percent Christian, 6.6 percent Hindu, and 2 percent Buddhist, with the remainder belonging to other faiths. According to Boston University's 2020 World Religions Database, the population includes approximately 125,000 atheists or agnostics, 72,000 Sikhs, and 49,000 Baha'is.

Local community members estimate that the size of the Jewish population is less than 10,000.

## **Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom**

### **Legal Framework**

The constitution designates Islam as the official religion. It provides for freedom of religious worship "in accordance with established customs," provided this "does not conflict with public policy or violate public morals." The constitution states all citizens are equal before the law and prohibits discrimination on grounds of religious belief. The constitution states that the country is an independent, sovereign, and federal state comprised of seven emirates.

In October, the government enacted Federal Law 34 of 2023 on Combating Discrimination, Hatred, and Extremism, repealing and replacing a 2015 law. The law focuses solely on the three "Heavenly Religions" (Islam, Christianity, and Judaism) and their houses of worship and defines "extremism" as "any action by an individual or a group that stems from ideas, ideologies, values, or principles and that disrupts public order, denigrates religions, or promotes discrimination or hate speech."

The new law defines blasphemy as any act insulting God, religions, holy books, religious rituals or celebrations, prophets or their families or companions, houses of worship, or cemeteries. The law does not directly prohibit Muslims from converting to other religions, but the penal code's blasphemy provisions punish behavior viewed as contemptuous of the Quran and the Prophet Muhammad or offensive to Islamic teachings.

The law provides for imprisonment of up to five years for preaching against Islam or proselytizing to Muslims, and up to 10 years for establishing an organization for the purpose of proselytizing. If the organization serves to denigrate religions and spread hate speech, its formation then carries a minimum of 10 years in prison, while membership carries a maximum sentence of seven years per an article of Federal Law 34.

The penal code and Federal Law 34 also prohibit "abusing" a house of worship, ritual, or tenet of the "Heavenly Religions," labeling someone an infidel or unbeliever, and forming groups or holding meetings with the purpose of provoking religious hatred. Violations are punishable by prison sentences of up to five years if the actions disturb the public peace. Individuals face the death penalty if a killing results from their calls for the death of those they accuse of apostasy.

The law criminalizes any form of expression the government interprets as blasphemous or offensive toward "divine recognized religions," inciting religious hatred and discrimination, or insulting religious convictions. As of October, with the enactment of the new law on Combating Discrimination, Hatred, and Extremism, offenders are subject to imprisonment for one or more years and fines from 250,000 dirhams to two million dirhams (\$68,100 to \$545,000); noncitizens may be deported. The law prohibits any form of

expression, including through broadcasting, printed media, or the internet, that the government determines is contradictory to Islam, as well as literature it deems blasphemous or offensive toward religions. The possession with intent to distribute documents or recordings that promote events meant to denigrate Islam or proselytize another religion carries a prison sentence of at least one year and a fine of no less than 5,000 dirhams (\$1,400). Under the Combatting Discrimination, Hatred, and Extremism law, the production and distribution of materials that denigrate divine religions carries a prison sentence of at least two years and a fine from 500,000 to two million dirhams (\$136,000 to \$545,000), while possession of these materials carries a prison sentence of at least one year and a fine from 50,000 to 200,000 dirhams (\$14,000 to \$54,500). The establishment of groups and organization of conferences the government deems as promoting discrimination, discord, or hatred carries a prison sentence of no less than five years.

Federal Law 34 also stipulates individuals who commit crimes related to insulting religions, discrimination, or hatred, to be referred to deradicalization centers known as Munasaha (counseling) centers if they are determined to espouse extremist ideologies that could compel repeat offenses. These centers were established by federal decree in 2019 to rehabilitate and reeducate individuals deemed as terrorist or harboring “extremist tendencies.” The centers submit progress reports every three months to public prosecutors, who in turn present recommendations to the courts on whether to release offenders or to extend their detention. The law also states that a court may order travel bans, surveillance, or movement restrictions on individuals with extremist tendencies. Additionally, Federal Law 34 allows the federal cabinet to issue “extremist lists” that includes extremist individuals or entities. The law stipulates that

federal courts would examine cases involving extremism and designation appeals.

The law prohibits black magic, sorcery, and incantations, which are punishable by an unspecified prison term, a fine of no less than 50,000 dirhams (\$14,000), and deportation in the case of noncitizens. Individuals seeking the aid of sorcerers also face prison sentences and/or fines.

Federal Law 9 of 2023 on Regulating Houses of Worship for Non-Muslims, also known as the Houses of Worship Law, went into force on November 30. Some of the law's provisions defer entirely to supplemental legislation, or "executive regulations," that the government is mandated to issue no later than May 30, 2024. The law presents baseline provisions on the licensing, financing, operations, activities, and oversight of non-Islamic houses of worship across the seven emirates, all under the supervision of the Ministry of Community Development. The law preserves each emirate's prerogative to license and oversee houses of worship in its territory and to prescribe additional registration and operational parameters. Abu Dhabi regulators did not communicate any procedural or legal changes to registered religious groups, who reported renewing their licenses as recently as November.

Pending the Houses of Worship Law's implementation, non-Muslim religious organizations and their places of worship remain under the purview of emirate-level regulators or rulers. In Abu Dhabi, religious organizations are required to obtain a license from the Department of Community Development (DCD), and in Dubai, from the Community Development Authority (CDA), but these regulators have not published their licensing procedures and requirements. Religious organizations in the remaining five emirates function based on official letters of recognition issued by their respective emirate's ruler. These licenses and letters are required to open



bank accounts, license clergy, establish houses of worship, or rent spaces for special services and events. The penal code stipulates an unspecified jail term and fines from 200,000 dirhams (\$54,500) for establishing or running an unlicensed house of worship or religious instruction.

The Houses of Worship Law mandates the creation of a government committee to document the practices, rites, and rituals of the country's non-Muslim religious groups. The law limits licenses to those religious groups recognized by the committee and conditions the license on the house of worship not undermining public order. A house of worship seeking a license must have 20 founding members, all of whom are adherents of the religion, over 40 years of age (unless waived by local regulators), resident in the country for the preceding five years but are not diplomats, and are of good reputation and social standing, with no record of being sentenced to prison. They must each present a recommendation letter from their respective religious group's top leadership, whether foreign or domestic, as well as proof of sufficient finances to establish and operate the house of worship.

The Houses of Worship Law limits the validity of first-time licenses to two years but authorizes regulators to waive this limit when renewing licenses indefinitely. Houses of worship holding licenses at the time of the law's enactment are required to amend their status to align with its provisions and must do so no more than six months after the issuance of the law's executive regulations, which the government is required to issue no later than May 2024. Local regulators may extend this deadline in six-month increments up to a maximum of two years.

The Houses of Worship Law prohibits proselytization and the denigration of any religion, denomination, or faith recognized by the government. It forbids inciting religious, racial, and ethnic tensions, engaging in political

discourse and action, and any undertaking viewed by the state as undermining public order. A similar ban applies to rites and rituals that inflict bodily harm or are deemed dangerous to the health, safety, or security of any of the attendees.

The Houses of Worship Law forbids religious activities outside licensed premises. It requires official approval for in-country conferences and gatherings and prohibits houses of worship from organizing meetings abroad. Failure to adhere to these provisions triggers a mandatory closure and dissolution of a house of worship, and a potential fine ranging from 5,000 to 1,000,000 dirhams (\$1,400 to 272,000). Individuals face a 100,000 to 3,000,000 dirhams (\$27,200 to \$817,000) fine under this law, as well as potential prison time, additional fines, and deportation under other laws.

The Houses of Worship Law requires houses of worship to have bank accounts in the country. It permits houses of worship to accept membership fees, gifts, grants, and bequests from within the country, but only after obtaining official approval. It categorically prohibits all forms of financial or material assistance from outside the country. The law bans soliciting donations through any means, including social, print, audio, or video media, or other communications channels. The local regulator's approval is also required for the transfer or provision of financial or material aid to parties outside the state. The law requires houses of worship to limit expenditures to the objectives stated in their licenses and to submit annual budget and financial reports to regulators. It grants regulators unconditional access to a house of worship's premises and to its records and ledgers.

Under the Houses of Worship Law, failure to adhere to these rules carries penalties ranging from warnings, temporary license suspensions, and managerial takeover, to complete dissolution and closure, depending on the

violation. Local regulators in Abu Dhabi and Dubai also require religious communities to obtain permits for certain activities, including holding public events, collecting donations, and worshipping in temporarily rented spaces such as hotels.

The penal code has no provisions prohibiting eating, drinking, and smoking in public during fasting hours for the month of Ramadan, nor does it prohibit non-Muslims from eating pork throughout the year. The federal government does not have provisions restricting restaurants from serving food during Ramadan fasting hours without installing curtains or otherwise covering the front of their businesses, in line with the lifting of such requirements in 2021. Individual emirates issue Ramadan guidelines annually about social norms within the emirate, which may include restrictions on food service within fasting hours. Consumption of alcohol by non-Muslims is not criminalized at the federal level; each emirate, however, is allowed to regulate “the use, circulation, and possession or trade of alcoholic beverages,” which may include a ban for Muslims at the local level. The government of Sharjah prohibits all consumption of alcohol.

Federal law prohibits churches from erecting bell towers or displaying crosses or other religious symbols on the outside of their premises, although they may place signs on their properties indicating they are churches. The Houses of Worship Law stipulates that the names of non-Islamic houses of worship may not contain references to a national symbol or figure, or to the UAE, its emirates, regions, or landmarks. No such limitation is placed on mosque names.

Islamic studies are mandatory for all students in public schools and for Muslim students in private schools. The government does not provide instruction in any religion other than Islam in public schools. In private

schools, non-Muslim students are not required to attend Islamic study classes. All students, however, are required to take national social studies classes, which include teaching on Islam. The government permits Christian-affiliated schools to provide instruction tailored to the religious background of the student – Islamic studies for Muslim students, Christian instruction for Christian students, and ethics or comparative religions for others.

Private schools deemed to be teaching material offensive to Islam, defaming any religion, or contravening the country's ethics and beliefs face potential penalties, including closure. All private schools, regardless of religious affiliation, must register with the government. Private schools are required to have a license from the federal Ministry of Education, and their curriculum must be consistent with a plan of operation submitted to and approved by the ministry. Each emirate's government is responsible for administrative oversight of schools.

Land ownership by noncitizens is restricted to designated freehold areas. This restriction is an impediment to most minority religious communities, which consist of noncitizens, that wish to purchase property to build houses of worship. Non-Islamic houses of worship are generally built on lands that the rulers of the emirates provided to these communities.

Labor laws prohibit discrimination based on race, color, sex, religion, nationality, ethnicity, or disability. Employees in the private and public sectors are entitled to five days of bereavement leave, with the exception of Muslim female public-sector employees, who, in the event of their husband's death, are entitled to four months and 10 days of paid leave. Additionally, Muslim public sector employees are afforded 15 days of leave to perform the Hajj pilgrimage, but no similar provisions exist for adherents of other religions.

According to the constitution, sharia is the principal source of legislation, although the judicial system applies both sharia and civil law, depending on the case. Sharia forms the basis for judicial decisions in most family law matters for Muslims, such as marriage, divorce, and inheritance. Federal law applies if either spouse is Emirati. Shia Muslims in Dubai may pursue Shia family law cases through a special Shia council rather than through the regular judicial system.

A federal civil personal status law for non-Muslim citizens and expatriates came into effect in February. The law allows for civil marriages, no-fault divorces, joint and equal child custody, the filing of wills, as well as recognition of paternity based on marriage or a notarized confirmation of parenthood. It stipulates equality between non-Muslim men and non-Muslim women in court testimonies, inheritance, the right to initiate divorce proceedings, and child custody. Non-Muslim foreigners may choose to apply their country's laws or Emirati legislation to family and personal status issues. The law, however, sets the minimum age for marriage at 21, whereas the laws applicable to Muslims set the age at 18, or lower if a judge approves. It does, however, relieve non-Muslims of the previous requirements to provide medical tests and witnesses, or submit to family counselling if seeking divorce.

Sharia also applies in some criminal matters and in retaliation and blood money crimes. Civil law provides the basis for decisions on all other matters. When sharia courts try non-Muslims for criminal offenses, judges have the discretion to impose civil or sharia penalties. In these cases, judges generally impose civil penalties. Higher courts may overturn or modify sharia penalties. Since 2020, the law applies the same sentences for so-

called “honor killings” as other murder cases rather than applying reduced sentences.

Federal law no longer includes the *hudud* (Quranically mandated) punishment of flogging. The jurisdiction of sharia courts is limited to blood money cases. While the government has generally decriminalized consensual extramarital sex, it may be punishable by six months of imprisonment if a complaint is filed by a husband or guardian of either of the parties. Local sharia laws and punishments regarding adultery and consensual extramarital sex also remain applicable.

Under the law, citizen and noncitizen Muslim men may marry non-Muslim women who are “people of the book” (Christian or Jewish). Muslim women may not marry non-Muslim men. Marriages between non-Muslim men and Muslim women are not recognized under the law. For noncitizens, courts in Abu Dhabi, Dubai, and Ras al-Khaimah conduct civil marriages that are not recognized under sharia. The courts also conduct civil marriages for interfaith couples; applicants for civil marriage are not questioned on religion.

Strict interpretation of sharia, which often favors the father, does not apply to child custody cases; courts have applied the “best interests of the child” standard for several years. According to sharia, a divorced woman may lose custody of her children to their father once daughters reach 13 years of age and sons 11 years of age. Women may file for continued custody until a daughter marries or a son finishes his education. The father, deemed the guardian, provides for the child financially, while the mother, the custodian, provides day-to-day care of the child.

In custody cases involving noncitizens, courts may apply the laws of the country of nationality of each child involved. Both the federal and Abu Dhabi personal status law for non-Muslims allow for joint custody agreements, civil marriages, birth certificates for children of unmarried parents, and the equality of men and women as witnesses. The laws allow a divorced woman to seek alimony and provide equal shares of an inheritance for men and women. The personal status law also allows for non-Muslim judges, creates a new court to hear these cases, and requires cases to be heard in both Arabic and English. The new personal status law does not apply to Muslim citizens, and the divorce and joint custody provisions of the law do not apply to some Muslim residents of countries that base their law on sharia.

The country's citizenship law does not include religion as a prerequisite for naturalization. Non-Muslim wives of citizens are eligible for naturalization after seven years of marriage if the couple has a child, or 10 years of marriage if the couple has no children. There is no automatic spousal inheritance provision for wives under the law if the husband is Muslim and the wife is non-Muslim. Such wives may not inherit their husband's property unless named as a beneficiary in their husband's will.

Abu Dhabi's Judicial Department permits Christian leaders to legally mediate divorces for Christians and agnostics if the bride and groom are both residents of the emirate. The government permits church officials to officiate at weddings for non-Muslims, but the couple must also obtain a marriage certificate from the Abu Dhabi Judicial Department. In both cases of marriage and divorce, the church official must be registered with the DCD as officially recognized to perform these acts. Christian couples may file for civil divorce without referring to their respective churches.

Noncitizens may register wills in the emirate in which they live. Since 2020, personal status laws permit the general terms of a will to be dealt with according to the law of the country specified in the will or, in cases where a country is not specified in the will, the law of the deceased person's country of nationality. This is not applicable to property, real or personal, purchased in the country, however, which remains subject to UAE law. The personal status law that came into effect in 2023 allows non-Muslims to register wills. The law stipulates that in the absence of a will for a non-Muslim foreigner, their estate is distributed equally among their spouse, children, and/or parents. However, the courts may apply the federal Civil Transactions Law upon the request of an heir. While the non-Muslim personal status law governing wills is federal, emirate-level regulators are responsible for their registration and enforcement.

The law prohibits membership in groups the government designates as terrorist organizations, such as the Muslim Brotherhood and its affiliates, or that promote damage to national unity or harm public order, with penalties reaching life imprisonment and capital punishment. The law prohibits activities the government deems supportive of political or extremist interpretations of Islam, including promoting views the government believes qualify as hate speech, insult religions, promote sectarianism, damage national unity or the reputation of the state, or harm public order and public morals. Punishment may include up to 25 years imprisonment and fines up to one million dirhams (\$272,000). Electronic violations of the law are subject to a maximum fine of four million dirhams (\$1 million). Abuse of religion to promote sedition and strife or to harm national unity and social peace is punishable with not less than 10 years imprisonment and a fine of not more than 500,000 dirhams (\$136,000).



The law does not allow for political parties or similar associations. The law does not protect the right of individuals to organize politically and specifically bans several organizations with political wings, including the Muslim Brotherhood, as regional and local terrorist groups.

The Fatwa Council, headed by the president of the Forum for Promoting Peace in Muslim Societies, is tasked with presenting a clear image of Islam, including issuing general fatwas and licensing individuals to issue fatwas, train muftis, and conduct research, in coordination with the *Awqaf*, an independent federal legal authority that reports directly to the cabinet. The Awqaf director general holds the title of deputy minister, and both the director general and the Awqaf board of directors are appointed by the cabinet. The Awqaf is responsible for managing domestic Islamic endowments, imam tutelage, education centers, publications, and general messaging.

Under the law, emirate and federal authorities concerned with mosque affairs are responsible for naming mosques, managing mosques and prayer spaces, including Shia religious centers, setting prayer times, organizing religious lectures, and preparing sermons. The law also stipulates that mosques and all Islamic prayer spaces must obtain licenses before hosting lectures or sermons, Quran memorization circles, and fundraising activities, and distributing written and visual material. The law further stipulates that citizen applicants must be given first consideration for vacant positions at mosques. The law prohibits those working in mosques from belonging to any illegal group or from participating in any political activities.

The law allows mosques to collect donations after securing official approval. However, the Houses of Worship Law explicitly prohibits non-Muslim groups from collecting donations, either directly or through third parties, or

soliciting donations through electronic and media platforms. It does not allow for licensed fundraising, and it mandates the dissolution and closure of houses of worship in violation. It does, however, allow them to charge membership fees and accept gifts, grants, and bequests, but only from within the UAE and with official approval. Fundraising and cybercrime laws punish the unlicensed collection and solicitation of donations, whether in-person or online, with unspecified prison sentences, potential deportation, and fines ranging from 150,000 to 500,000 dirhams (\$40,900 to \$136,000)

In Abu Dhabi, the Awqaf is entrusted with overseeing Islamic religious affairs including mosques, sermons, imam education and training, and publications. Non-Islamic religious affairs fall under the mandate of the DCD, which regulates, licenses, and oversees non-Islamic houses of worship, religious leaders, religious events organized outside houses of worship, and fundraising activities across the emirate. The Abu Dhabi DCD uses a three-tier system of authorization for regulating non-Islamic houses of worship. Under the system, instituted in 2020, the DCD issues licenses to houses of worship, permits to denominations seeking authorization to operate under the licensed house of worship, and visas to the religious leaders of these denominations.

The Dubai CDA is the official body mandated to oversee all civil institutions and nonprofits in the emirate, including non-Muslim religious groups. The CDA issues operating licenses, permits for events, and monitors fundraising activities. The law states that civil institutions may only collect donations or launch fundraising campaigns after obtaining the CDA's written approval. Fines for noncompliance range from 500 dirhams to 100,000 dirhams (\$136 to \$27,200). Repeated violations may result in the doubling of fines, not to exceed 200,000 dirhams (\$54,500).

Authorized religious organizations and charities are eligible to receive tax-exempt status.

The country is not a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

## **Government Practices**

### **Abuses Involving Violence, Detention, or Mass Resettlement**

The government, having designated the Muslim Brotherhood as a terrorist organization in 2014, continued to restrict the activities of organizations and individuals allegedly associated with al-Islah or who otherwise supported Islamist political activities. During the year there were reports of persons held incommunicado and without charge because of their political views or affiliations, which often involved alleged links to Islamist organizations. The government continued to impose restrictions on speech related to and in support of Islamist political activities.

Ahmed Mansoor, a human rights activist who, according to Human Rights Watch, has been in prison since 2017 for advocating political inclusion, was accused by the government of promoting “a sectarian and hate-filled agenda.”

According to an international human rights organization, at least 62 political detainees remained in detention after completing their sentences, including Mohammed al-Roken, a human rights lawyer arrested in 2012 and sentenced to 10 years in prison for his defense of alleged members of al-Islah, a Muslim Brotherhood affiliate.

On December 7, the Public Prosecution referred 84 defendants to the Abu Dhabi Federal State Security Court of Appeal on charges of establishing a clandestine organization to commit acts of violence and terrorism within the country in connection with the al-Islah party-affiliated Justice and Dignity Committee. International human rights organizations noted that among the defendants were individuals already imprisoned on other convictions or in government custody based on political activities, including Mansoor, al-Roken, and al-Rumaithi.

### **Abuses Limiting Religious Belief and Expression**

Police and courts continued to enforce laws prohibiting sorcery. In addition, customs authorities occasionally denied or delayed entry to passengers carrying items deemed intended for sorcery, black magic, or witchcraft. There were multiple reports in local media of arrests of individuals practicing black magic and witchcraft. In July, local media reported that Abu Dhabi court ordered the imprisonment of seven people for six months and fined them 50,000 dirhams (\$13,600) for practicing sorcery and deceiving others.

Representatives of non-Islamic faiths stated that registration, licensing procedures, and requirements for minority religious groups remained unclear in all the emirates. The federal government required non-Muslim religious groups to register, but according to some observers, the lack of a clear legal designation continued to result in many groups having ambiguous legal status and created difficulties for them to carry out certain administrative functions, including banking and signing leases. Religious groups said the bureaucracy was slow to conduct security checks and issue necessary visas. The governments of individual emirates continued to require religious groups to obtain approval to establish formal places of

worship, such as temples, mosques, or churches; to hold religious services in rented spaces, such as hotels or convention centers; or to conduct financial transactions.

The Awqaf continued to vet and appoint men as Sunni imams (except in Dubai, where vetting is conducted by the Islamic Affairs and Charitable Activities Department (IACAD), based on their educational background and knowledge of Islam, along with security checks. According to the Awqaf and IACAD, the government continued to fund Sunni mosques, except for those considered private, and retained all Sunni imams as government employees.

According to local observers, Abu Dhabi Police directed private security personnel at several camps for laborers to surveil gatherings of laborers and report if they discussed security, social, and religion-related concerns.

IACAD controlled the appointment of Sunni clergy and their conduct during worship in Dubai mosques. All imams in Dubai's more than 2,200 Sunni mosques were government employees and included both citizens and noncitizens. Dubai's IACAD maintained more stringent qualification requirements for expatriate imams than for local imams, such as requiring them to demonstrate memorization of larger parts of the Quran. Expatriate imams' starting salaries were much lower than those of local imams, a practice permitted under federal law. Expatriate imams also could not obtain other employment without permission from the authorities. Local communities stated these additional requirements did not hinder their ability to find qualified imams.

The Ja'afari Endowments Charitable Councils (JECCs), located in Dubai and Sharjah and appointed by the rulers of their respective emirates, managed Shia affairs for their respective emirates, including overseeing mosques and

community activities, managing financial affairs, and hiring imams. In other emirates, Shia affairs were overseen by the courts of the respective rulers. The councils complied with weekly guidance from IACAD, and the JECC in Dubai at times issued additional instructions on sermons to Shia mosques. Shia adherents worshiped in and maintained their own mosques. The government considered all Shia mosques to be private; however, they were technically eligible to receive some funds from the government upon request. Shia observers said they doubted the government would provide funding in practice, and therefore Shia mosques did not seek it.

Ismaili Muslims continued to appoint their own community leaders.

Abu Dhabi's DCD required that all non-Muslim houses of worship obtain no objection certificates from the civil defense, municipality, and unspecified security services before obtaining full licensure. Minority leaders noted increasing transparency by the DCD in the licensing process during the year.

In 2022, the Dubai CDA granted an official license to The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Church of Jesus Christ) to hold religious services at a temporary venue ahead of the planned construction of a temple on government-granted land. The church continued to maintain a chapel in Abu Dhabi.

In Dubai, the CDA required "Gates of the East," a Jewish umbrella association, to renew a temporary license every three months and to submit permits for specific religious services. Discussions between "Gates of the East" and the government on plans to build a synagogue in Dubai continued, and the congregations under the organization's purview continued to rent hotel rooms for worship. Although the Dubai government offered the Jewish community's provisional license holder a site at a Jebel Ali religious

compound on the outskirts of the city, members of the community stated that the location would pose problems for Jews who refrain from the use of mechanical devices, including cars, on the Sabbath.

Unlike general two-year licenses associated with a permanent venue, the temporary licenses maintained by the Church of Jesus Christ and “Gates of the East” must be renewed every three months and do not allow the organizations to secure religious worker visas. Religious workers maintained legal residence in Dubai through other employment.

Community leaders stated the Abu Dhabi guidelines requiring non-Muslim religious leaders to be full-time clergy and sufficiently credentialed in order to obtain a clergy visa continued to create difficulties for religious leaders, who served their congregations on a volunteer or part-time basis or who did not have a theology degree. Observers reported that Abu Dhabi authorities exempted some non-Muslim religious groups from this requirement on an ad hoc basis. Under the system, licensed Abu Dhabi-based houses of worship independently vet these religious leaders and formally recommend to the DCD whether it should issue them visas. Some religious community members stated the system discriminated against smaller and less recognized denominations and forced them either to end operations or to come under the umbrella of larger, licensed religious groups. They noted that regulators expected these larger groups to manage or monitor the bank accounts of these smaller, guest congregations.

Within prisons, authorities continued to require Muslims to attend weekly Islamic services, and non-Muslims reported some pressure to attend ostensibly nonmandatory lectures and classes about Islam. Some non-Muslim clergy stated incarcerated members of their communities did not have worship spaces. Non-Muslim clergy said that when authorities granted

them prison access, authorities permitted them to take Bibles to prisoners. In some emirates, non-Muslim clergy wishing to visit prisoners faced bureaucratic hurdles, such as opaque and arbitrary responses to visit requests, while others were not permitted to visit prisoners at all.

The government continued to permit Shia Muslims to observe Ashura at their houses of worship, but not in public. There were no public processions in Dubai or the northern emirates, where the majority of the country's Shia population resides. Shia houses of worship continued to stream live feeds of their prayers.

The government required all conference organizers, including religious groups, to receive permission to hold conferences and events, including disclosing speaker topics. Abu Dhabi authorities required churches to obtain approvals for visiting religious leaders wishing to engage with local congregations.

Individuals belonging to non-Islamic faiths, including Christianity, Hinduism, Sikhism, Buddhism, and Judaism, said they were able to worship and practice without government interference within designated compounds or buildings, or within private facilities or homes, provided they observed the prohibition on proselytizing. While the government generally did not allow non-Muslims to worship, preach, or conduct prayers in public, there were reports of government-sanctioned exceptions.

In February, Abu Dhabi inaugurated the government-sponsored Abrahamic Family House, with a mosque, a church, and the country's first synagogue located on one site and representing the three Abrahamic faiths. There is a pillar in front of each house of worship with religious symbols that are illuminated at night: a crescent moon, a cross, and a menorah. Deputy



Prime Minister and Minister of Interior Saif bin Zayed Al Nahyan and Minister of Tolerance Nahyan bin Mubarak Al Nahyan attended the inauguration. The compound's mosque is exclusively Sunni. The church is officially under the purview of Abu Dhabi's Catholic Church. The Abrahamic Family House stated on its website that it is dedicated to the pursuit of peaceful coexistence and building bridges through the exchange of knowledge, ongoing dialogue, and the practice of faith. It launched a full educational programming calendar, including organized workshops for persons from diverse faith backgrounds on issues such as the individual and collective promotion of peace, interfaith collaboration as a driver for climate change policies, and art in the Abrahamic faiths.

The synagogue, which carries the name of Moses Ben Maimon, the 12th-century philosopher and rabbinical scholar more generally known as Maimonides, began worship services soon after the inauguration. During the year, it hosted services for Passover, Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, and Sukkot. The current lack of housing structures within walking distance from the synagogue posed challenges to the Jewish orthodox community on the Sabbath, especially during the summer, when temperatures often exceeded 100 degrees Fahrenheit.

Press reported that thousands of Jews, many visiting from Israel, celebrated Passover in large seders across the country in April, coinciding with Easter and Ramadan. Muslim and Jewish community members hosted several joint iftars in April. The Chabad community stated it hosted the largest Passover seder in the world in Dubai, attended by more than 1,000 persons.

Organizers of the Dubai International Holy Quran Award conducted a program that allowed prisoners who memorized the Quran to have their sentences reduced or to be granted amnesty. In April, local media reported

that 50 prisoners participated in a Quran memorization and reading competition held by Dubai police.

In August, local news reported that at least 6,000 civil marriages were performed in Abu Dhabi during the first half of 2023, compared with 4,020 in 2022.

The government of Abu Dhabi, stating that it was doing so as a security measure, installed closed circuit television cameras in houses of worship and other spaces used for prayer, as it has also done for most other large public facilities. Some churches reported paying for the cameras, and others reported not having access to camera feeds, saying they were monitored by security agencies.

The country's two primary internet service providers, both majority-owned by the government, continued to block certain websites critical of Islam or supportive of religious views the government considered extremist, including some Islamist sites. The service providers continued to block other sites on religion-related topics, including ones with information on Christianity, atheism, and testimonies of former Muslims who converted to Christianity.

Some religious groups, particularly Christians and Hindus, advertised religious functions in the press or online, including holiday celebrations, memorial services, religious conventions, and choral concerts, without government objection. The government also allowed businesses to advertise, sell merchandise, and host events for non-Islamic religious holidays such as Christmas, Easter, and Diwali. Those events required official approval if they were to include a religious service or host unlicensed religious speakers. The government allowed local media to report on non-

Islamic religious holiday celebrations, including service times and related community safety reminders.

Observers familiar with the media environment stated government officials warned journalists against publishing or broadcasting material deemed politically or culturally sensitive. Editors and journalists commonly practiced self-censorship due to fear of government retribution, particularly since most journalists were foreign nationals and could be deported. Authorities did not allow the importation or publication of some books they viewed as critical of the government, Islam, and local culture, as well as books that supported the Muslim Brotherhood or its ideology. The government implemented standards for media content, mandating that it should “refrain” from offending God and Islamic beliefs and should respect other “divine religions.” The standards required content creators to avoid publishing material deemed to represent possible harm to national unity and social cohesion or violate the sanctity of public morals.

The Awqaf continued to oversee the administration of Sunni mosques, except in Dubai, where they were administered by IACAD. On its website, the Awqaf stated its goals included offering “religious guidance in the UAE to instill the principle of moderation in Islam.” IACAD stated its goals included creating a harmonious society, aware of Islam and charity, through influential and socially effective institutions. The Awqaf and IACAD continued to distribute weekly guidance to Sunni imams regarding subject matter, themes, and content of Friday sermons; published a Friday sermon script every week; and posted the guidance on its website in different languages. The Awqaf regularly held training workshops to instruct imams on sermon delivery and how to communicate the values of moderation and tolerance.

The Awqaf applied a three-tier system in which junior Sunni imams followed the Awqaf script for Friday sermons closely; midlevel 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. Sermons sometimes dealt with contemporary topics. For example, in an apparent response to public outcries against Pride Month in June, sermons urged individuals to safeguard the Muslim character, cooperate in righteousness and piety, and demonstrate “beautiful character” for children to emulate. Other sermon topics included the power of contemplation, prayer, and piety as keys to inner peace. Some Shia imams chose to use Awqaf-approved weekly addresses, while others wrote their own sermons. Friday sermons were translated into English and Urdu on the Awqaf’s website and mobile application. The JECCs in Dubai and Sharjah complied with guidance from the IACAD and issued additional instructions on sermons to Shia mosques.

In February, the Awqaf cooperated with the Mohamed bin Zayed University for Humanities on a five-month program to train and qualify imams and preachers. The program recognized imams and preachers as “thought leaders, highly respected opinion makers, and primary advocates for promoting values of moderation and tolerance.” In June, the Awqaf launched a national training program to educate Emirati religious leaders on tolerance and equip them to advance religious moderation in the community.

In April, Dubai extended the eligibility to its long-term residency program (Golden Visa valid for 10 years of residency) to imams, preachers, and religious researchers who have spent at least 20 years in their role in Dubai, enabling them to self-sponsor themselves and their families in the country,

precluding the need for their sponsors to renew their residency permits annually.

The Awqaf operated official toll-free call centers and a text messaging service for fatwas in Arabic, English, and Urdu. Fatwa categories included belief and worship, business transactions, family issues, women's issues, and other Islamic legal issues. Callers explained their question directly to an official mufti, who then issued a fatwa. Both female (muftiya) and male (mufti) religious scholars worked the telephones at the fatwa hotline. The Awqaf also operated an online "e-fatwa" service. In September, Dubai's Senior Mufti Ahmed al-Haddad warned against unqualified persons who provided fatwas on social media and urged Muslims to benefit from technology that could connect them to scholars of religion.

Authorities did not allow the importation or publication of some books they viewed as critical of the government, Islam, and local culture, as well as books that supported the Muslim Brotherhood or its ideology. The Awqaf continued to prohibit the publication and distribution of religious literature deemed extremist, pro-political Islam, or inconsistent with moderate interpretations of Islam. It also continued to place restrictions on non-Islamic religious publications that could be considered proselytizing or promoting a religion other than Islam. Awqaf employees inspected mosques to ensure prohibited publications were not present.

Some bookstores carried pro-atheism, anti-organized religion titles by well-known authors in English and Arabic. These stores also sold books on non-Islamic and non-Abrahamic religions and faiths.

Customs authorities continued to review the content of imported religious materials and occasionally confiscated some of them.

Dubai's IACAD oversaw licensing of public and private Islamic prayer rooms and prohibited anyone from building, allocating, or modifying a space to be used as a prayer room without prior approval from IACAD.

### **Use of Properties and Buildings**

The JECCs in Dubai and Sharjah continued to regulate Shia worship spaces.

The government continued to grant permission to build houses of worship on a case-by-case basis. Minority religious groups said, however, that the construction of new houses of worship did not keep up with demand from the country's large noncitizen population. Many existing churches continued to face overcrowding and many congregations lacked their own space, resulting in some congregations limiting the frequency of religious services. Licensed religious groups faced difficulty obtaining additional land or space, despite making such requests to authorities. Some groups in Abu Dhabi complained that women congregants were forced to skip evening services or attend services at smaller churches in residential areas because they did not feel safe in the industrial areas where their churches were located. Groups reported resistance from local authorities regarding their bids for land plots in cities where they were seeking to expand or build their first house of worship. Because of the limited capacity of official houses of worship, dozens of religious organizations and different groups shared worship space, sometimes in private homes. In Dubai, overcrowding of the emirate's two church compounds was especially pronounced and routinely led to congestion and traffic. Some smaller congregations met in private locations or shared space with other churches to which rulers had given land. Noncitizen groups with land grants did not pay rent on the property.

Several emirates also continued to provide free utilities for religious buildings.

Noncitizens, who generally made up the entire membership of minority religious groups, relied on grants and permission from local rulers to build houses of worship. For these groups, land titles remained in the respective ruler's name. The country's Christian churches were all built on land donated by the ruling families of the emirates in which they were located, including houses of worship for Catholics, Coptic Orthodox, Greek Orthodox, Anglicans, and other denominations. Ajman and Umm al Quwain remained the only emirates without dedicated land for Christian churches, although congregations continued to gather in other spaces, such as hotels, subject to COVID-19 capacity restrictions. There was one Sikh temple in Dubai, built on land provided by the government within a religious complex shared with Christian churches.

The government did not always enforce the prohibition against bell towers and crosses on churches, and some churches in Abu Dhabi, Dubai, and Sharjah displayed crosses on their buildings or had ornamental bell towers; none of them used the towers to ring or chime bells.

Although the government permitted non-Muslim groups to raise money from their congregations using collection boxes and baskets, some unlicensed noncitizen religious groups were unable to open bank accounts because of the lack of a clear legal category to assign the organization. Several religious minority leaders reported the ambiguity created practical barriers to renting space, paying salaries, collecting funds, and purchasing insurance, making it difficult to maintain financial controls and accountability.

Members of unregistered religious organizations stated that their organizations continued to face challenges in renting spaces at hotels. In Abu Dhabi, the DCD continued to require religious functions at hotels be preapproved and overseen by registered clergy. The government permitted groups that chose not to register to carry out religious functions in private homes if these activities did not disturb neighbors through excessive noise or vehicle congestion.

In Dubai, non-Muslim religious community members reported continued delays in obtaining permits from the CDA to worship in spaces outside of government-designated religious compounds. Community representatives also reported restrictions as well as confusion and uncertainty regarding CDA policies for obtaining licenses and event permits; policies were not published by the CDA. Some religious community representatives in Dubai reported the CDA sometimes cancelled events with little notice.

The government continued to provide land for non-Islamic cemeteries. Cremation facilities and associated cemeteries were available for the large Hindu community. Non-Muslim groups said the capacity of crematoria and cemeteries was generally sufficient to meet demand. The government required residents and nonresidents to obtain a permit to use cremation facilities, and authorities routinely granted such permits. The government allowed individuals from all religious groups except Islam to use the crematoria. Hindu temples also provided cremation services to non-Hindus.

Except in the judiciary and military, non-Muslim religious minorities did not serve in senior federal positions, while among Muslims, Sunnis predominated in these positions, reflecting the country's religious demographics.



Abu Dhabi police directed private security personnel at several camps for laborers to surveil gatherings of laborers and report if they discussed security, social, or religious-related concerns.

Immigration authorities continued to ask foreigners applying for residence permits to declare their religious affiliation on applications, although immigration officers said foreigners, including atheists and agnostics, had the option to leave the field blank. School applications also continued to ask for family religious affiliation in order to distinguish between Muslim students, who were required to take Islamic studies, and non-Muslim students, who were exempt. According to the Ministry of Interior, officials collected the information for demographic statistical analysis.

On July 10, the Dubai Courts announced the establishment of an inheritance department for non-Muslim residents, which will provide a dedicated office for non-Muslims to register their wills and have them administered by Dubai Courts. The establishment of the department follows the nationwide implementation of a federal personal status law for non-Muslim foreigners residing in the UAE in February.

Religious groups reported official permission was required for any activities held outside their places of worship, including charitable activities, and this permission was sometimes difficult to obtain. Some Muslim and non-Muslim groups reported their ability to engage in nonreligious charitable activities, such as providing meals or social services, was limited because of government restrictions. The government required groups to obtain permission prior to any fundraising activities.

The Ministry of Education confirmed the news first announced by the UAE embassy in the United States in January that the government would include

the Holocaust in the curriculum for public primary and secondary schools in the 2023-24 school year. The Times of Israel news website reported that the Ministry of Education was working with the Israeli NGO IMPACT-se and Yad Vashem, the Holocaust memorial in Jerusalem, to develop Holocaust-related material for UAE schools.

## **Transnational Repression**

Authorities issued an arrest warrant for Khalaf Abdalrahman Humaid al-Rumaithi, a UAE citizen residing in Turkey, reportedly invoking the bilateral agreements on legal and judicial cooperation of the Arab Interior Ministers' Council, the Arab League's network of law enforcement agencies. On May 7, Jordanian authorities detained al-Rumaithi at Amman's international airport when he arrived from Turkey. On May 17, Jordanian authorities extradited al-Rumaithi to the UAE, under what Human Rights Watch stated were "exceptional circumstances that circumvented Jordan's normal extradition procedures." While the government announced in May al-Rumaithi's arrest and its intent to retry him in accordance with UAE law pertaining to individuals convicted in absentia, his whereabouts while in UAE government custody were unknown for four months until late September. Al-Rumaithi was sentenced in absentia in 2013 to 15 years in prison as part of the "UAE94" trial charging him and other dissidents with fomenting sedition and establishing a secret organization affiliated with the UAE-banned Muslim Brotherhood. On December 7, authorities brought terrorism charges against al-Rumaithi as part of a mass trial of 84 defendants, which Human Rights Watch reported were most likely related to his involvement with the al-Islah party-affiliated Justice and Dignity Committee.

## **Abuses Involving Discrimination or Unequal Treatment**

Prominent government figures routinely acknowledged minority religious holidays and promoted messages of tolerance through various print and media platforms. President Muhammad bin Zayed Al Nahyan described the Abrahamic Family House in a tweet as a “monument to constructive civilized dialogue and a forum for peace and human fraternity.” In another tweet, the President commemorated the anniversary of ISIS crimes against the Yazidi religious minority in Iraq and called for embracing coexistence and countering extremism.

The government reacted quickly to several instances in Europe that involved the desecration of the Quran. In January, following the burning of Qurans in Sweden and the Netherlands, the government issued statements that “strongly condemned” the burning of Qurans “by extremist[s]” and emphasized the need to shun “hate speech violence” and “polarization” in favor of tolerance and coexistence. Similar criticisms were made in the press and on social media. On June 29, the MFA summoned the Swedish ambassador to protest the burning of a Quran by an “extremist” in Stockholm. An MFA statement said that Sweden “demonstrated a lack of respect for social values” and called for shunning hate speech and promoting the principles of tolerance and peaceful coexistence. Commentators at two newspapers published in the country, *al-Ittihad* and *al-Khaleej*, rejected freedom of expression as a defense of the Quran burning, warning that such acts could “deepen ideological fissures and fuel extremism.” X (formerly Twitter) influencers in the country described the perpetrator as “filthy” and “cowardly,” and blasted the incident as “irresponsible,” “disrespectful,” and emblematic of “extremism and religious hatred.” The MFA summoned the Swedish Chargé d’Affaires on July 21 to protest the “repeated attacks and abuses” against the Quran by “extremists” in Sweden, according to an MFA statement. The MFA also

issued a statement July 23 that “strongly condemned” the burning of a Quran by Danish “extremists. The MFA later “strongly condemned” the September 23 tearing-up of a Quran by Dutch “extremists.” On September 25, the MFA released a statement that called for the “monitoring [of] hate speech that negatively impacts peace and security.”

In March, the federal government inaugurated the Manara (Arabic for “beacon”) Regional Center for Coexistence to “counter extremist ideologies and promote peace and tolerance.” The center pledged to work with the Anti-Defamation League (ADL), one of its flagship partners, to promote acceptance by developing “anti-hate” educational materials, researching “bias and bigotry,” facilitating university student exchanges and regional conferences, and fostering people-to-people engagements. ADL leadership stated the ADL will be “the key player in providing educational programming” and will work with the center to “build, enhance, and deploy comprehensive and tested programs to promote coexistence.” In September, the center launched initiatives for university students that involved academic research to identify and counter domestic and regional bias and intolerance and promote coexistence and inclusive communities.

On International Holocaust Remembrance Day, the private Crossroads of Civilizations Museum in Dubai commemorated the Holocaust at a ceremony in cooperation with the Israeli and German embassies. The museum unveiled a Torah scroll, which survived the Holocaust and is on permanent loan to the museum from the Memorial Scrolls Trust in London. The nonprofit organization “Together–Vouch For Each Other” hosted a separate Holocaust observance in Dubai.

In October, the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum offered a two-day program to Emirati-diplomats in training at the Anwar Gargash Diplomatic

Academy. The program, titled “The Holocaust and Modern Diplomacy,” covered the history of guiding UN resolutions and the international systems in place to prevent genocide, definitions of antisemitism, and Holocaust denial and distortion.

In April, Dubai’s IACAD organized an interfaith iftar that brought together 1,000 persons from different faiths, along with faith leaders, Muslim scholars, government officials, and members of the diplomatic community. IACAD described the iftar as an initiative to promote “humanitarian fraternity.” Abu Dhabi’s DCD organized its own interfaith iftar at the Abrahamic Family House and invited 45 religious representatives to attend and embody “the spirit of unity and coexistence.”

On November 12, senior government officials, including President Muhammad bin Zayed Al Nahyan, posted messages of congratulations on X in Arabic, English, and Hindi on the Diwali Hindu festival. The President, as well as the Vice President and Ruler of Dubai, Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum, wished a Merry Christmas “to our Christian brothers around the world” on social media.

### **Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom**

According to non-Muslim groups, there continued to be strong cultural and societal pressure discouraging conversion from Islam and encouraging conversion to Islam, particularly from family members.

According to non-Muslim religious community representatives, there was a high degree of societal tolerance for minority religious beliefs and traditions,

particularly for those associated with houses of worship officially recognized by the federal or local governments.

Holiday foods, decorations, posters, and books continued to be widely available during major Christian and Hindu holidays, and Christmas trees and elaborate decorations remained prominent features at hotels, major shopping centers, and public spaces. Media continued to print reports of religious holiday celebrations, including Christmas festivities and Hindu festivals such as Diwali. English-language dailies provided limited reporting on Jewish Passover at the Abrahamic Family House.

Religious literature, primarily related to Islam, was available in stores. Some bookstores carried the core religious works of other faiths, such as the Bible, Torah, and Hindu and Buddhist literature.

Private and government-run radio and television stations frequently broadcast Islamic programming, including sermons and lectures; they did not feature similar content for other religious groups.

In some cases, organizations reported that hotels, citing government regulatory barriers, were unwilling to rent space for non-Islamic religious purposes, such as weekly church services.

Approximately 75,000 adherents of the Dawoodi Bohra, an Ismaili branch of Shia Islam, including approximately 20,000 living in the country, gathered in Dubai to mark Ashura celebrations led by their global spiritual leader, Syedna Mufaddal Saifuddin.

Two licensed Hindu temples operated in Dubai, including a facility at the Jebel Ali religious compound, which reported in August that it had received

more than 1.6 million visits in its first year since it opened in late 2022. In Abu Dhabi, construction continued on a Hindu temple, scheduled to open in 2024 on land provided by the government.

There were no Buddhist temples; some Buddhist groups met in private facilities.

In April, the community of a Sikh gurdwara (a place of worship and assembly) in Dubai organized an interfaith iftar that included participation from Dubai government authorities and religious leaders from various faiths.

Jewish community leaders reported a rise in antisemitic incidents on social media and in schools following the October 7 Hamas attacks. Jewish community leaders said religious services open to the public in Dubai were suspended as of October 7 out of an abundance of caution. Services in Abu Dhabi continued to be held at the Abrahamic Family House synagogue, although community members noted a sharp decrease in attendance.

## **Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement**

The Secretary of State visited the Abrahamic Family House on October 14, calling it “an exemplary model for active exchange between faiths,” and subsequently discussed his visit with the UAE President. The Ambassador, visiting U.S. government officials, and embassy and consulate general officers engaged government officials throughout the year on efforts to support religious diversity, inclusiveness, and tolerance and discussed licensing procedures and regulatory practices involving religious and religiously affiliated groups.

Zayed University held the second official International Holocaust Remembrance Day Ceremony in Abu Dhabi, in a collaboration with the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum and the U.S. embassy. Speakers at the event included an American Holocaust survivor, then Minister of Culture and Youth Noura al-Kaabi, and a member of the senior staff of the Washington Institute for Near East Policy. The event emphasized the importance of Holocaust history and the need to confront hate and promote tolerance in the UAE.

In June, the U.S. Special Envoy to Monitor and Combat Antisemitism met with the Foreign Minister to discuss religious tolerance and coexistence, and the importance of education in combating antisemitism. She also took part in a panel discussion alongside a senior executive of the American Jewish Committee (AJC) at the state-run Anwar Gargash Diplomatic Academy. The discussion promoted the values of tolerance and understanding and was attended by the academy's Emirati students, visiting AJC board members, and members of foreign diplomatic missions.

During the year, the Ambassador, other embassy and consulate general officers, and visiting senior U.S. government officials met regularly with representatives of religious organizations and other groups associated with minority religious communities, including Christian church leaders, Sikh and Hindu community leaders, Jewish community representatives, and the Baha'i and Bohra communities. Embassy and consulate general officers also met with Islamic organizations. In these meetings, U.S. officials discussed the promotion of religious tolerance and emphasized the U.S. government commitment to religious freedom.

In February, the embassy donated a rare edition of the Quran to the Mohammed bin Rashid Library during the Emirates Airline Festival of



Literature. In April, as part of its Ramadan outreach activities, the embassy and consulate general hosted *suhors* (in the UAE, meals following the nighttime *Isha* prayers) and iftars with government, media, religious, business, and cultural figures, including those with an interfaith theme. Remarks by U.S. officials throughout the year encouraged efforts to build mutual understanding among different religions and cultures. Embassy and consulate general officers also participated in celebrations of other religious groups, such as Jewish Shabbat services and interfaith events hosted by the Sikh gurdwara.

The then Chargé d'affaires visited the construction site of Abu Dhabi's Hindu temple in June and met leaders of the Hindu community. The Chargé also attended the inauguration of the Abrahamic Family House in February along with other embassy personnel.