United Arab Emirates

Released by the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor

UNITED ARAB EMIRATES

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion in accordance with established customs, and the Government generally respects this right in practice, but with some restrictions. The Constitution declares that Islam is the official religion of the country, and the Government defines all citizens as Muslims.

There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom by the Government during the period covered by this report. Government policy continued to contribute to the generally free practice of religion with some restrictions. The Government controls virtually all Sunni mosques and places general restrictions on freedom of assembly and association, including for religious purposes. Nonetheless, religious groups with dedicated religious buildings can worship and conduct business. The Government follows a policy of tolerance toward non-Muslim religious groups and in practice interfered very little in their religious activities. Proselytizing and publicly distributing non-Islamic religious literature is prohibited.

There were no reports of societal abuses based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice, although societal pressure discouraged conversion from Islam to other religions, and there were instances of discriminatory caricatures in the media.

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights.

Section I. Religious Demography

The country has an area of 32,300 square miles and a population of more than 5 million. Approximately 80 percent of the country's residents are noncitizens. Of the citizens, 85 percent are Sunni Muslim and an estimated 15 percent or fewer are Shi'a. Noncitizen residents are predominantly from South and Southeast Asia, although there are substantial numbers from the Middle East, Europe, Central Asia, the former Commonwealth of Independent States, 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 is "other." According to unofficial figures, at least 15 percent of the population is Hindu, 5 percent is Buddhist, and 5 percent belong to other religious groups, including Parsi, Baha'i, and Sikh. These estimates differ from census figures because census figures do not count "temporary" visitors and workers and count Baha'is and Druze as Muslim.

Non-Muslim religious leaders from inside and outside of the country regularly referred to it as one of the most liberal countries in the region in terms of governmental and societal attitudes toward allowing all persons to practice their religions freely. While citizens regarded the country as a Muslim country that should respect Muslim religious sensibilities on matters such as public consumption of alcohol, modest dress, and public deportment, the society also emphasized respect for privacy and Islamic traditions of tolerance, particularly with respect to some Christian groups. Western casual attire for men and women was permitted throughout the country.

Many hotels, stores, and other businesses patronized by both citizens and foreigners were permitted to sell alcohol and pork to non-Muslims and to acknowledge openly non-Muslim holidays such as Christmas, Easter, and Diwali (although such displays generally are not permitted during the month of Ramadan). Shopping
centers were festive during Christian holidays, and traditional Christian holiday foods, decorations, posters, books, and videotapes were widely available. School children gathered in Dubai malls to sing Christmas carols while "department store Santas" handed out gifts. Reports of religious holiday celebrations, including church services, were regularly printed in the media.

Section II. Status of Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion in accordance with established customs, and the Government generally respected this right in practice; however, there were some restrictions.

The Constitution declares that Islam is the official religion of all seven of the constituent emirates of the federal union. The Government funds or subsidizes almost 95 percent of Sunni mosques and employs all Sunni imams. Five percent of Sunni mosques are considered private, and several mosques have large private endowments. The Government recognizes a number of Christian denominations, through the issuance of land-use permits, for the construction and operation of churches.

There is a dual system of Shari'a (Islamic) courts for criminal and family law matters and secular courts for civil law matters. Shi'a Muslims in Dubai may pursue Shi'a family law cases (marriage, death, and inheritance cases) through a special Shi'a council rather than the Shari'a courts. Non-Muslims are sometimes tried for criminal offenses in Shari'a courts. Not all crimes are punishable by Shari'a penalties. In cases punishable by Shari'a penalty, non-Muslims generally receive civil penalties at the discretion of the judge. Shari'a penalties imposed on non-Muslims also may be overturned or modified by a higher court.

During the month of Ramadan, Muslims and non-Muslims are required by law to refrain from eating, drinking, and smoking publicly during fasting hours out of respect for Islamic practice. Shi'a are free to celebrate Ashura as they choose within Shi'a premises.

The General Authority for Islamic Affairs and Endowments oversees most issues related to Islamic affairs in the country. The General Authority distributes weekly guidance to Sunni imams regarding subject matter, themes, and content of religious sermons, and ensures that clergy do not deviate frequently or significantly from approved topics in their sermons. Most imams are noncitizens; a significant number are Egyptian or Syrian. Except in Dubai, where the Department of Islamic Affairs and Endowments controls the appointment of clergy and their conduct in all mosques, the Government does not appoint sheikhs (imams) for Shi'a mosques. Shi'a clergy are free to choose the subjects of their sermons, which reportedly did not deviate in practice from approved (Sunni) topics during the reporting period.

The Shi'a minority, concentrated in the emirates of Dubai and Sharjah, is free to worship and maintain its own mosques. All Shi'a mosques are considered private and may receive funds from the Government upon request.

There are no General Authority licensing or registration requirements for the recognition and regulation of non-Muslim religious groups. The Government follows a policy of tolerance toward non-Muslim religious groups and in practice interfered very little in their religious activities. In practice, the Government seeks to educate citizens to avoid extremist tendencies or ideologies.

Islamic studies are mandatory in public schools (schools supported by the federal government primarily for citizen children) and in private schools for Muslim children. Instruction of any religion other than Islam is not permitted in public schools; however, religious groups may conduct religious instruction for their members in their dedicated religious facilities. Private schools found to be teaching subjects that offend Islam, defame any religion, or contravene the country's ethics and beliefs may face penalties, including potential closure.

Although textbooks have been banned in the past for containing material offensive to Islam, there were no new reports of banned school books during the reporting period.
The Ministry of Education requires children identified by passport records as Muslims (including many Baha'is and Druze) to take Islamic studies classes.

Proselytizing and distributing non-Islamic religious literature are prohibited under penalty of criminal prosecution, imprisonment, and deportation, on the grounds that such behavior transgresses core Islamic teachings. While there are no specific laws against missionary activity, the Government has in the past reportedly threatened to revoke the residence permits of persons suspected of proselytizing for religions other than Islam. There were no reports of such threats during the reporting period.

Immigration authorities routinely asked foreigners applying for residence permits to declare their religious affiliation on residence applications; however, the Government reportedly does not collect or analyze this information, and there were no reports of religious affiliation negatively affecting the issuance or renewal of visas or residence permits.

During the period covered by this report, rulers of various emirates pardoned at least 2,139 prisoners on religious and national holidays, without regard to the prisoners' religious affiliations. Those pardoned generally were serving sentences of 3 to 5 years for financial crimes, immigration violations, and other relatively minor offenses; pardons reportedly were not extended to prisoners convicted of rape, murder, or kidnapping.

The following are considered national holidays: Waqfa, Eid al-Adha, the Islamic New Year, the Birth of the Prophet Muhammad, Ascension Day, and Eid al-Fitr.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

As the state religion, Islam is favored over other religious groups, and conversion to Islam is viewed favorably.

Under Shari'a, Muslim men may marry non-Muslim women who are "people of the book" that is, Christian or Jewish women; however, Muslim women are not permitted to marry non-Muslim men unless the man converts to Islam. Because Islam does not consider marriage between a non-Muslim man and a Muslim woman valid, both parties to such a union are subject to arrest, trial, and imprisonment on grounds of fornication. There were no reports of such penalties being applied during the period covered by this report.

Shari'a, according to the Maliki school of jurisprudence, applies in cases of divorce. According to a new personal status law, women generally are granted custody of female children until they reach the age of 13 and are granted custody of male children until they reach the age of 10. If the mother is deemed unfit, custody reverts to the next able female relative on the mother's side. Shari'a, as practiced in the country, permits polygamy (up to four legal wives).

Conversion from Islam to another religion is not recognized, and no data was available to assess if any such conversions took place. Such converts may be persuaded to return to the Islamic fold, may conceal their new faith, or may travel to another country where their conversion is recognized to avoid the social stigma of turning away from Islam.

A list of expatriate Muslim converts is published annually.

Non-Muslim groups can own their own houses of worship, where they can practice their religion freely, by requesting a land grant and permission from the local ruler to build a compound (the title for the land remains with the ruler). Those with land grants are not charged rental payments. The Emirate of Sharjah also waives utility payments for religious buildings. There is no national-level method of granting official status to religious groups or approving land grants. Rather, rulers of the individual emirates exercise autonomy in choosing whether to grant access to land and permission to build houses of worship within their emirates. However, the process can be time consuming and there were a handful of requests pending, some for more than a year. Religious groups without dedicated buildings of worship often use the facilities of other religious groups or worship in private homes. There were no reports of government interference in this common practice.

Even though Christians represent a minority of the non-Muslim population, their facilities for worship...
outnumber those of other non-Muslim communities because Islam considers Christians to be "people of the book," and therefore the Government may look on these congregations more favorably when considering land grants for houses of worship.

There are at least 33 Christian churches in the country built on land donated by the ruling families of the emirates in which they are located. Chapels are in some cases clustered in close proximity to one another or in locations some distance from the residential areas in which congregation members live, effectively limiting attendance. Four emirates are home to Christian primary and secondary schools. The Emirate of Abu Dhabi and the Emirate of Dubai donated land for Christian cemeteries, and the Emirate of Abu Dhabi donated land for a Baha'i cemetery.

The Government does not permit churches to display crosses on the outside of their premises or to erect bell towers. However, this restriction is not always enforced and some churches do display crosses on their buildings. Some churches were overcrowded and had to conduct services or masses in open courtyards on special occasions due to space limitations. However, there was no government interference within church compounds. Churches accepted converts from all religions except Islam because the Government does not recognize or permit conversion from Islam to another religion.

There are no synagogues for the small expatriate Jewish population.

There are two temples shared by Sikhs and Hindus in Dubai. There are no Buddhist temples. Buddhists, Hindus, and Sikhs conducted religious ceremonies in private homes without interference. There reportedly was a pending request to build a temple for the growing Buddhist population.

There are two operating cremation facilities and associated cemeteries for the large Hindu community, one in Abu Dhabi and one in Dubai. A new crematorium in al-Ain should soon be operational, and land has been granted to build one in Sharjah. Crematoriums currently in use meet current demand. Official permission must be obtained for their use in every instance; however, procedures are straightforward and do not appear to create a hardship. People from all religions except Islam are allowed to use the cremation facilities. Workers generally do not build Hindu temples at work sites, partly because facilities would need assigned maintenance personnel. There were no reports that municipalities dismantled temples built by Hindu workers in labor camps during the reporting period.

Non-Muslim groups raise money from their congregations and receive financial support from abroad. Religious groups openly advertise religious functions in the press, such as holiday celebrations, memorial services, religious conventions, choral concerts, and fundraising events. Non-Muslim religious leaders reported that customs authorities rarely questioned the entry of religious materials such as Bibles and hymnals into the country, unless the materials were printed in Arabic. In the past, customs authorities questioned the entry of religious materials deemed in excess of the normal requirements of existing congregations, although in most instances the items were permitted entry. Customs authorities reportedly were less likely to question the importation of Christian religious items than that of other non-Muslim religious items. Nonetheless, in virtually all instances, importation of the material in question eventually was permitted.

The country's sole Internet service provider, Etisalat, occasionally blocked websites containing religious information. These sites included information on the Baha'i faith, Judaism, negative critiques of Islam, and testimonies of former Muslims who converted to Christianity. The Government's Information and Privacy Law provides penalties for using the Internet to preach against Islam, inciting someone to commit sin, and using the Internet to promote a breach of public decency. No incidents were reported during the period covered by this report.

The Advisor to the President on Judicial and Religious Affairs, al-Sayed Ali al-Hashemi, as well as Chairman Hamdan Al Mazroui and Director General Mohammed Matar Al Kaabi of the General Authority of Islamic Affairs and Endowments, regularly represented the country at Islamic, ecumenical, and Christian conferences and events abroad and met regularly with religious leaders in the country.

There were no reports of religious prisoners or detainees in the country.
Forced Religious Conversions

There were no reports of forced religious conversion, including of minor U.S. citizens who had been abducted or illegally removed from the United States, or of the refusal to allow such citizens to be returned to the United States.

Improvements and Positive Developments in Respect for Religious Freedom

On June 11, 2008, President Khalifa's Religious Affairs Adviser Al-Sayed Ali al-Hashemi hosted an interfaith gathering at his residence, to which he invited the Apostolic Vicar of Arabia and Roman Catholic Bishop of Abu Dhabi, Paul Hinder, and the local Coptic Church patriarch to deliver homilies to a gathering of Muslim scholars, clergy, and foreign (including non-Muslim) diplomats.


On April 27, 2008, the Egyptian Coptic Orthodox Church in the UAE celebrated Easter. The President’s Religious Affairs Advisor al-Hashemi attended the celebration.

On April 15, 2008, the President received the credentials of 13 ambassadors, including a new envoy from the Vatican. The Vatican envoy passed to President Khalifa the greetings of Pope Benedict XVI, who paid tribute to the country's leadership for its care for cultural diversity and intercultural dialogue. He touted the country as a model in its support for and advocacy of tolerance and respect for cultural diversity and cross cultural interaction. President Khalifa reaffirmed the country's determination to foster dialogue among cultures and civilizations and tolerance among various religious groups.

On March 26, 2008, a new Ismaili Center was opened in Dubai. The center was built on land donated by Sheikh Mohammad bin Rashed al-Maktoum, Vice President and Prime Minister and Ruler of Dubai. Prince Karim Aga Khan, the spiritual leader of Shi'a Ismaili Muslims, declared the center a place of peaceful contemplation. The new center in Dubai is the first in the region and the fourth in the world after London, Vancouver, and Lisbon. The center seeks to promote cultural, educational, and social programs from a broad non-denominational perspective within the ethical framework of Islam.

On March 23, 2008, Higher Education and Scientific Research Minister Sheikh Nahyan bin Mubarak al-Nahyan opened a new Evangelical Church building in Abu Dhabi, which will house 21 congregations in larger accommodations than were previously available to them. The church inauguration coincided with Easter celebrations. The Sheikh congratulated Christians for Easter and the inauguration of the church, adding that "the Evangelical Church building in Abu Dhabi reflects once more that the country is tolerant and respects the beliefs of others." In February 2008 more than 2,500 Christians from 21 different denominations had their own celebration of the facility, at which Pastor Cameron Arensen likewise acknowledged "30 years of the Christian community in Abu Dhabi."

On February 13, 2008, Patriarch Theodore II, Eastern Orthodox Pope of Alexandria and Africa, signed an agreement with the Juma al-Majid Center for Culture and Heritage to help bridge cultural divisions between Muslims and Christians. The agreement provides for the exchange of printed materials and periodicals between the two groups. It also sets forth the establishment of a digital photography lab at the Patriarchy in Alexandria by the Juma al-Majid Center. The Center will also assist the Patriarchy in repairing manuscripts for which the Center has the necessary equipment.

On January 16, 2008, Sharjah Crown Prince and Deputy Ruler, Sheikh Sultan bin Mohammed Bin Sultan al-Qasimi, received Bishop Michael Augustine Lewis, head of the Anglican Church in Cyprus and the Gulf. Both parties reiterated the importance of tolerance, interfaith dialogue, and mutual coexistence between religions.

On January 5, 2008, Hamdan al-Mazrouei, Chairman of the General Authority of Islamic Affairs and
Endowments, said that the authority had just prepared its strategic plan for the years 2008-10, which is based on promoting moderate Islamic culture and protecting society against "false ideas and trends" that lead to extremist behavior.

On December 25, 2007, the President’s Religious Affairs Advisor al-Hashemi participated in Anglican Church celebrations of Christmas.


On October 11, 2007, al-Habeeb Ali Zain al-Abideen al-Jifri, founder and Director General of the Tabah Foundation, coordinated an open letter written and signed by 138 leading Muslim religious scholars and leaders to the heads of all Christian churches and influential leaders of the world seeking common ground on which the two global religions might cooperate in establishing peace. The basis of the letter was the shared belief of both Muslims and Christians in the principles of love of one God and love of one's neighbor. Cardinal Jean-Louis Tauran, president of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue in the Roman Curia, welcomed the letter and praised the fact that the letter recommended a spiritual dialogue between the two religions.

On September 23, 2007, President Khalifa received Muslim scholars, writers, intellectuals, and journalists who came to offer Ramadan greetings. President Khalifa stressed the need to spread the culture of love, moderation, and tolerance in the face of ideological and cultural challenges that distort the image of Islam.


On September 11, 2007, the President’s Religious Affairs Advisor al-Hashemi delivered a speech about Islam and tolerance at the U.S. Embassy during a 9/11 remembrance ceremony.

On September 9, 2007, a stone was laid in Sharjah to mark the construction of the first Russian Orthodox Church on the Arabian Peninsula. The land was granted by the Ruler of Sharjah to serve the Orthodox community in the country, estimated at 100,000. The $10 million (36 million dirham) church will have space for 1,000 worshippers in its main building, plus an additional 1,000 in an adjacent community room, when completed in 2009.

Section III. Societal Abuses and Discrimination

There were no reports of societal abuses based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice, although societal pressures discourage conversion from Islam to other religions, and there were instances of discriminatory caricatures in the media.

There were anti-Semitic or religiously intolerant editorials, op-eds, and editorial cartoons in the English and Arabic-language electronic and print media. The Arabic-language press, including newspapers such as Al-Ittihad, Al-Bayan, and Al-Khaleej, carried editorial cartoons depicting stereotypical and negative images of Jews along with Jewish symbols, in addition to comparisons of Israeli leaders to Hitler and the Nazis.

Citizens expressed concern regarding the influence of the cultures of the country's foreign majority on Emirati society (including the influence on Emirati children of non-Emirati household help). However, in general, citizens were familiar with foreign societies and believed that the best way to balance foreign influence was by supporting and strengthening indigenous cultural traditions.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights.
U.S. embassy officials in Abu Dhabi and consulate general officials in Dubai discussed religious tolerance and freedom with government officials on a number of occasions and encouraged the Government to increase religious freedom by permitting the opening or expansion of religious facilities for the large expatriate population.

Embassy officials met with the leadership of the General Authority for Islamic Affairs and Endowments on a regular basis to discuss religious freedom and tolerance.

On April 30, 2008, the U.S. Special Envoy to the Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC) met with the President’s Religious Affairs Advisor al-Hashemi for a discussion of religious tolerance and interfaith cooperation.

On January 13, 2008, the U.S. President praised the country as a "model of a Muslim state that is tolerant of other faiths" in a speech shortly after he arrived in Abu Dhabi as part of a regional tour.

Embassy and consulate general officials also helped to protect religious freedom by monitoring its status through informal inquiries and meetings with government officials and representatives of Muslim, Christian, and other religious groups.

Released on September 19, 2008

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