

# UNITED ARAB EMIRATES 2018 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

## Executive Summary

The constitution designates Islam as the official religion. It guarantees freedom of worship as long as 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. The law prohibits blasphemy, proselytizing by non-Muslims, and conversion from Islam. An antidiscrimination law includes prohibitions on religious discrimination, and criminalizes acts the government interprets as provoking religious hatred or insulting religions. Local press reported in July that an Ajman court convicted “an Arab man” of blasphemy based on an offensive phone message and sentenced him to seven years’ imprisonment followed by deportation, and a fine of 500,000 dirhams (\$136,000). In January a court sentenced a Dominican woman and her child’s Yemeni biological father to a suspended one-month jail term and deportation for violating the country’s interpretation of sharia by engaging in extramarital sex. Police and courts also continued to enforce laws against sorcery. According to media reports, in February the Federal Supreme Court upheld an 18-month jail term against “an Arab man” for charges of witchcraft, fraud, and trying to coerce sex from a woman. The government prohibited the dissemination of literature it perceived as supporting extremism. The General Authority of Islamic Affairs and Endowments (Awqaf) continued to provide strict guidance for the content of sermons in Sunni mosques and instructions on sermons to Shia mosques across all emirates except Dubai, where mosques were overseen by Dubai’s Islamic Affairs and Charitable Activities Department (IACAD). In June the cabinet approved the formation of a Fatwa Council to oversee fatwa issuances, license muftis, provide training, and conduct research. Individuals belonging to non-Islamic faiths reported they could worship in private without government interference but faced some restrictions on practicing their religion in public. Government-controlled internet service providers blocked access to websites critical of Islam or supportive of views the government considered extremist. Christian churches and Hindu and Sikh temples serving the noncitizen population operated on land donated by the ruling families. During the year, construction was underway on multiple houses of worship. Regulatory requirements sometimes limited the ability of religious organizations to rent space for worship and limited certain charitable activities. The minister of tolerance hosted conferences and meetings with religious minority leaders throughout the year to promote interfaith tolerance both domestically and internationally.

According to non-Muslim religious communities, there was a high degree of tolerance within society for minority religious beliefs and traditions, particularly for those associated with officially recognized houses of worship, although conversion from Islam was strongly discouraged. Conversion to Islam was encouraged, however. Anti-Semitic materials continued to be available for purchase at book fairs. There were continued instances of anti-Semitic remarks on social media and news sites.

The Department of State Special Advisor for Religious Minorities spoke at a conference in Abu Dhabi on Muslim minorities at the invitation of the Ministry of Tolerance. In meetings with senior government counterparts, the Ambassador, embassy and consulate general officers, and visiting U.S. officials reviewed ways to promote respect among faith groups and freedom for minority groups to practice their religions in the country, as well as government initiatives to foster religious tolerance and counter extremist interpretations of Islam. Embassy and consulate general officials also engaged with a broad range of minority religious groups present in the country. As concrete demonstrations of the importance of interfaith dialogue, the embassy and consulate general hosted interfaith events to encourage and support religious freedom and tolerance, engaging with various religious communities.

### **Section I. Religious Demography**

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 9.7 million (July 2018 estimate). Approximately 11 percent of the population are citizens, of whom more than 85 percent are Sunni Muslims, according to media reports. The vast majority of the remainder are Shia Muslims, who are concentrated in the Emirates of Dubai and Sharjah.

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

Of the total population (both citizen and noncitizen), the 2005 census, the most recent, found 76 percent to be Muslim, 9 percent Christian, and 15 percent from other religious groups comprising mainly Hindus and Buddhists, and also including Parsis, 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 that in 2010, 76.9 percent of the total population was Muslim, 12.6 percent Christian, 6.6 percent Hindu, 2 percent Buddhist, with the remaining belonging to other faith traditions.

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

### **Legal Framework**

The constitution designates Islam as the official religion. It guarantees 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 law prohibits black magic, sorcery, and incantations, which are punishable by a prison term ranging from six months to three years, and deportation for noncitizens.

The law does not directly prohibit Muslims from converting to other religions; however, the penal code defers to sharia on matters defined as crimes in Islamic doctrine, which in many interpretations prohibits apostasy.

The law provides for imprisonment of up to five years for preaching against Islam or proselytizing to Muslims. The law also prohibits “abusing” a holy shrine or ritual of any religion, insulting any religion, inciting someone to commit sin or contravene national values, labeling someone an infidel or unbeliever, and forming groups or holding meetings with the purpose of provoking religious hatred. Offenders are subject to fines up to two million dirhams (\$545,000) and imprisonment generally ranging from five to 10 or more years.

The law prohibits blasphemy, defined as any act insulting God, religions, prophets, messengers, holy books, or houses of worship. Offenders are subject to imprisonment for five or more years and fines from 250,000 dirhams (\$68,100) to two million dirhams (\$545,000); noncitizens may be deported.

The law does not require religious organizations to register; however, the formation of a legal entity, which requires some form of registration, is necessary for operational functions such as opening a bank account or renting space. Each

emirate oversees registration of non-Muslim religious organizations and the process differs by emirate, organization, and circumstance. Currently, there is no consistent legal framework across the seven emirates for registering non-Muslim religious organizations and, as a result, different religious organizations register under different ministries. In Dubai, religious organizations are required to obtain a license from the Community Development Authority (CDA). The government has also granted some religious organizations land in free trade zones, where they legally registered by applying for a trade license, which allows them some operational functions.

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

The 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.

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 some teaching on Islam. The government permits Christian-affiliated schools to provide instruction tailored to the religious background of the student, for example, 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, defamatory of 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. Administrative oversight of the schools is a responsibility of each emirate's government.

The law prohibits the distribution of religious literature the government determines is contradictory to Islam, as well as literature it deems blasphemous or offensive towards religions.

Land ownership by non-citizens is restricted to designated freehold areas. Outside of special economic zones and designated freehold areas, the law restricts the majority company ownership to citizens. This restriction is an impediment to most minority religious communities (which consist of noncitizens) from purchasing property to build houses of worship.

The law prohibits multiple forms of discrimination, including religious discrimination, and criminalizes acts the government interprets as provoking religious hatred or insulting religion through any form of expression. It also criminalizes the broadcasting, publication, and transmission of such material by any means, including audio/visual or print media, or via the internet, and prohibits conferences or meetings the government deems promote discrimination, discord, or hatred.

According to the constitution, sharia is the principal source of legislation, although the judicial system applies two types of law, depending on the case. Sharia forms the basis for judicial decisions in most family law matters for Muslims, such as marriage and divorce, and inheritance for both Muslims and non-Muslims; however, in the case of noncitizens, the parties may petition the court to have the laws of their home country apply, rather than sharia. Sharia also applies in some criminal matters. Civil law provides the basis for decisions on all other matters. Shia Muslims in Dubai may pursue Shia family law cases through a special Shia council rather than through the regular judicial system. When sharia courts try non-Muslims for criminal offenses, judges have the discretion to impose civil or sharia penalties. Higher courts may overturn or modify sharia penalties.

Under the law, Muslim men may marry non-Muslim women who are “people of the book” (Christian or Jewish). Muslim women may not marry non-Muslim men. Non-Muslim men and Muslim women who marry are subject to arrest, trial, and imprisonment on grounds of engaging in extramarital sex, which carries a minimum sentence of one year in jail, as the marriage is considered invalid; any extramarital sex between persons of any religion is subject to the same penalties.

In the event of a divorce between a Muslim father and non-Muslim mother, sharia law will usually apply. Strict interpretation of sharia – which oftentimes favors the father – does not apply to child custody cases. The father, deemed the guardian, provides for the child financially, while the mother, the custodian, provides day-to-day care of the child. Non-Muslim wives of citizens are ineligible for naturalization. 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 the marriage certificate from the Abu Dhabi Justice Department. In both cases of marriage and divorce, the church official must be registered with the Ministry of Justice as officially recognized to perform these acts.

Noncitizens may register wills in the emirate in which they live. In the absence of a will filed with the government, the assets of foreigners who die are subject to sharia. Non-Muslims are able to register their wills with the Abu Dhabi judicial system as a way to safeguard their assets and preserve their children's inheritance rights. In Dubai, foreigners may file wills at the Dubai International Financial Center (DIFC) Court Wills and Probate Registry and include their own choice of law clause. The DIFC Wills Service Center allows non-Muslim business owners and shareholders to designate an heir. Dubai wills not filed in the DIFC Court are subject to sharia. The DIFC's jurisdiction extends to the Emirate of Ras al Khaimah. There are courts for Personal Status and for Inheritance for non-Muslims in the Abu Dhabi Court of First Instance.

The law prohibits activities the government deems supportive of political or extremist interpretations of Islam. These include the use of the internet or any other electronic means to promote views the government believes insult religions, promote sectarianism, damage national unity or the reputation of the state, or harm public order and public morals. Punishments include imprisonment and fines from 500,000 dirhams (\$136,000) to one million dirhams (\$272,000). In August the government increased the penalties for electronic violations of the law, including raising the maximum fine to four million dirhams (\$1.09 million). The law prohibits membership in groups the government designates as terrorist organizations, with penalties up to life imprisonment and capital punishment.

In May the president issued a federal law declaring that local authorities concerned with mosque affairs are responsible for naming mosques, providing and supervising the needs of mosques and prayer spaces, determining the timing of the second call to prayer, organizing religious lectures, and preparing sermons. The law also defined acts prohibited in mosques, prayer spaces, and Eid Musallas (open prayer spaces outside of mosques or prayer halls smaller than mosques) without a

license, such as giving lectures or sermons, holding Quran memorization circles, fundraising, 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 carrying out any political or organizational activities.

The law restricts charitable fundraising activities, including by religious organizations, by prohibiting the collection of donations or advertising fundraising campaigns without prior approval from authorities.

In May the president approved a federal law on charitable endowments, clarifying circumstances under which fundraising was permissible. The law classifies charitable endowments into three categories: where proceeds are designated for the founder's offspring; where proceeds are designated for charitable endeavors supporting the underprivileged; and where the proceeds are designed for both offspring and the general public.

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 and permits for events, and monitors fundraising activities. The law also 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 (\$140) to 100,000 dirhams (\$27,200).

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

### **Government Practices**

According to press, in July the criminal court of Ajman sentenced "an Arab man" to seven years of imprisonment, deportation upon completion of jail time, and a fine of 500,000 dirhams (\$136,000) on blasphemy charges for an allegedly offensive voice mail that, according to media reports, contained offensive words and insulted God.

In January a court sentenced a Dominican woman and her child's Yemeni biological father to a suspended one-month jail term and deportation for violating the country's interpretation of sharia by engaging in extramarital sex.

Police and courts continued to enforce laws against sorcery. In February the Federal Supreme Court upheld an 18-month jail term against someone identified in the press as “an Arab man” for charges of witchcraft, fraud, and trying to coerce sex from a woman.

There were reports of government actions targeting the Muslim Brotherhood, designated by the government as a terrorist organization, and individuals associated with the group.

Within prisons, the authorities required Muslims to attend weekly Islamic services. In Abu Dhabi, some Christian clergy reported difficulties visiting Christian prisoners and raised concerns about lack of worship space for incarcerated Christians. They reported that when they were granted prison access, they were permitted to take Bibles to the prisoners.

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

In June the cabinet approved the formation of the UAE Fatwa Council, headed by President of the Forum for Promoting Peace in Muslim Societies Sheikh Abdallah bin Bayyah. The cabinet tasked the council 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. In a July statement to the official Emirates news agency, Sheikh bin Bayyah declared, “Unofficial and rogue fatwas are the first gateway to extremist ideologies, and now is the time to demolish the misuse of this platform and end the distortion of fatwas to serve terrorism, murder, and destruction, both in Muslim countries and among Muslim minorities in different countries of the world.”

The Awqaf continued to vet and appoint Sunni imams, except in Dubai, based on their gender, educational background and knowledge of Islam, along with security checks. According to the federal Awqaf, the government continued to fund Sunni mosques, with the exception of those considered private, and retained all Sunni imams as government employees.



The federal Awqaf continued to oversee the administration of Sunni mosques, except in Dubai, where they were administered by the IACAD. On its website, the Awqaf stated its goals included offering “religious guidance in the UAE to instill the principle of moderation in Islam.” It continued to distribute weekly guidance to Sunni imams regarding subject matter, themes, and content of Friday Islamic sermons; published a Friday sermon script every week; and posted the guidance on its website. The Awqaf applied a three-tier system in which junior imams followed the Awqaf Friday sermon script 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. Some Shia sheikhs (religious leaders) chose to follow Awqaf-approved weekly addresses, while others wrote their own sermons. In June the Awqaf launched the first English-language Friday sermons in Ras Al Khaimah. In September the Awqaf launched an initiative to translate Friday sermons for reading and listening into English and Urdu on its website and mobile application.

Dubai’s IACAD controlled the appointment of Sunni clergy and their conduct during worship in Dubai mosques. All of the imams in Dubai’s more than 2,000 Sunni mosques were government employees and included both citizens and noncitizens. Qualification requirements were more stringent for expatriate imams than for local imams, and starting salaries much lower.

The Jaafari Affairs Council, located in Dubai, managed Shia affairs for all of the country, including overseeing mosques and community activities, managing financial affairs, and hiring preachers. The council complied with the weekly guidance from IACAD and issued additional instructions on sermons to Shia mosques. In May, acting on an initiative of Prime Minister and Ruler of Dubai Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum, emirate officials inaugurated the Imam Al Sadiq Center in Dubai for Shia religious and community activities. The site is intended to hold 2,400 people.

The government did not appoint sheikhs for Shia mosques. Shia adherents worshiped in and maintained their own mosques. The government considered all Shia mosques to be private; however, they were eligible to receive some funds from the government upon request.

The Awqaf operated official toll-free call centers and a text messaging service for fatwas in three languages (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 phones at the fatwa hotline.

The government permitted Shia Muslims to observe Ashura in private, but not in public. There were no public processions in Dubai or the northern emirates.

Representatives of non-Islamic faiths said registration procedures and requirements for minority religious groups remained unclear in all emirates other than Dubai. The government did not require non-Muslim religious groups to register, but according to some observers, the lack of a clear legal designation continued to result in an ambiguous legal status for many groups and created difficulties in carrying out certain administrative functions, including banking or signing leases. For example, the government required religious groups to register as a precondition for establishing formal places of worship, such as temples, mosques, or churches, or for holding religious services in rented spaces such as hotels or convention centers. Community sources indicated that the government permitted unregistered religious organizations to rent spaces at hotels in some circumstances. The government permitted groups that chose not to register to practice in private homes, as long as this activity did not disturb neighbors through excessive noise or vehicle congestion.

The government required all conference organizers, including religious groups, to register conferences and events, including disclosing speaker topics.

In Dubai, there were reports of delays in obtaining permits to worship in spaces outside of government-designated religious compounds from the CDA, tasked with implementing a new oversight structure for civil institutions and nonprofits and with regulating non-Muslim faith communities in the emirate. There were also reports of additional restrictions on holding some religious services in hotels, due to confusion and uncertainty regarding CDA policies, and last-minute event cancellations affecting religious groups.

Immigration authorities continued to ask foreigners applying for residence permits to declare their religious affiliation on residence applications. School applications also asked for family religious affiliation. Applicants were required to list a religious affiliation, creating potential legal issues for atheists and agnostics. According to Ministry of Interior officials, the government collected this information for demographic statistical analysis only.

Individuals belonging to non-Islamic faiths, including Christianity, Hinduism, Sikhism, Buddhism, and Judaism, said they generally could worship and practice without government interference within designated compounds or buildings, or in private facilities or homes. While the government did not generally allow non-Muslims to worship, preach, or conduct prayers in public, there were reports of government-sanctioned exceptions, such as the annual Easter celebrations held on a beach.

The government continued to provide land for non-Islamic cemeteries. There were cremation facilities and associated cemeteries for the large Hindu community. The Al Ain municipality in Abu Dhabi Emirate also ran a cremation facility. Non-Muslim groups said the capacity in crematoriums and cemeteries was 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 people from all religious groups except Islam to use the cremation facilities.

In November the Abu Dhabi International Airport opened a multi-faith prayer room for use by the general public.

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. The government allowed local media to report on non-Islamic religious holiday celebrations, including service times and related community-safety reminders.

In spite of legal prohibitions on eating during daytime hours of Ramadan, in Dubai and several northern emirates, non-Muslims were exempt from these laws in hotels and most malls; non-Muslims could eat at some stand-alone restaurants and most hotels in Abu Dhabi as well. In Dubai and several northern emirates, the emirate governments permitted most licensed restaurants to offer alcohol during Ramadan.

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

Customs authorities continued to review the content of religious materials imported into the country and occasionally confiscated some materials, such as books. Additionally, sometimes customs authorities denied or delayed entry to passengers carrying items deemed intended for sorcery, black magic, or witchcraft. Specific items airport inspectors reportedly confiscated included amulets, animal bones, spells, knives, and containers of blood.

Officials from the Awqaf's Department of Research and Censorship reviewed religious materials such as books and DVDs published at home and abroad. The department's Religious Publications Monitoring Section continued to limit the publication and distribution of religious literature to those it considered consistent with moderate interpretations of Islam and placed restrictions on non-Islamic religious publications, such as material that could be considered proselytizing or promoting another religion over Islam. The section issued permits to print the Quran and reviewed literature on Quranic interpretation. The government continued to prohibit the publication and distribution of literature it believed promoted extremist Islam and overtly political Islam. The Religious Publications Monitoring Section inspected mosques to ensure prohibited publications were not present.

The Anti-Defamation League noted that despite the central government's policy of promoting religious tolerance, the Dubai emirate sponsored three speakers with a history of anti-Semitic comments at an emirate-sponsored Ramadan event, a ceremony for the Dubai Holy Quran Award. Omar Abdel Kafi, also spoke at the opening session of the May 2018 "Tolerance and Diversity of Cultures" conference in Abu Dhabi, held at the Emirates Center for Strategic Studies and Research. Another of the speakers identified in the report, Saleh al-Maghemsy, spoke at the April "Al-Quds – Location and Status" conference in Abu Dhabi, under the patronage of the Minister of Tolerance Sheikh Nahyan bin Mubarak al Nahyan.

The government continued to grant permission to build houses of worship on a case-by-case basis. Minority religious groups said, however, the construction of new houses of worship had not kept up with demand from the country's large noncitizen population. Many existing churches continued to face overcrowding and many congregations lacked their own space. In Dubai, overcrowding of the emirate's two church compounds was especially pronounced, and routinely led to congestion and traffic. Media reports highlighted that holiday services often attract tens of thousands of worshippers to Dubai's church compounds. 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 make up the membership of most 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. There were approximately 42 Christian churches, built on land donated by the ruling families of the emirates in which they were located. Ajman and Umm Al Quwain were the only emirates without dedicated land for Christian churches, although congregations gathered in other spaces, such as hotels.

There are two Hindu temples and one Sikh temple in Dubai. Abu Dhabi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Zayed allocated land in Al-Wathba, Abu Dhabi, for the construction of a privately funded Hindu temple, scheduled to be completed by 2020. In January the minister of tolerance and the Greek Orthodox Patriarch of Antioch and All the East inaugurated Saint Elias Greek Orthodox Cathedral in Abu Dhabi. There were no Buddhist temples; some Buddhist groups met in private facilities. There were no synagogues for the expatriate resident Jewish population, but regular communal worship took place on the Sabbath and holidays in a private villa in Dubai. In December Bloomberg published an article about the Dubai Jewish community with the permission of its leaders, marking the first time the worship space had been publicly acknowledged. Construction was underway on a new Anglican church in Abu Dhabi; the projected completion date is not clear.

Although the government permitted non-Muslim groups to raise money from their congregations and from abroad, some 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 this ambiguity created practical barriers to renting space, paying salaries, collecting funds, and purchasing insurance, and made it difficult to maintain financial controls and accountability.

In Islamic court cases involving non-Muslim defendants, judges had the discretion to impose civil or sharia penalties, and sources said the judges generally imposed civil penalties.

Minister of Tolerance Sheikh Nahyan bin Mubarak Al Nahyan often spoke publicly in support of free practice of religion, including during a February address to a delegation from the Catholic University of Paris. The minister continued to host the International Institute of Tolerance, which sponsored the Dubai-based

World Tolerance Summit in November, which featured messaging on respect for religious pluralism.

The government engaged with religious minorities frequently. In January the minister of tolerance hosted senior Christian leaders from across the Gulf Cooperation Council at his palace in Abu Dhabi and discussed interfaith relations and their ability to worship in the UAE. In January Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum, prime minister and ruler of Dubai, hosted Aga Khan IV, imam of the Shia Ismaili Muslims, as part of the Aga Khan's diamond jubilee tour as spiritual leader and to promote the Aga Khan Foundation.

In October Abu Dhabi Crown Prince and Deputy Supreme Commander of the Armed Forces Mohammed bin Zayed and numerous other officials hosted a visiting evangelical Christian delegation from the United States to discuss promotion of tolerance and religious pluralism.

During the St. Anthony's Coptic Orthodox Cathedral's Christmas celebration, Minister of Tolerance Sheikh Nahyan bin Mubarak Al Nahyan addressed the congregation and condemned the terrorist attack against the Church of Mar Mina in Cairo and affirmed the country's commitment to religious tolerance and interfaith understanding.

In June Minister of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation Sheikh Abdullah bin Zayed Al Nahyan met with Pope Francis and other senior Vatican officials in Rome. Local media reports noted that the discussions included promoting interfaith dialogue and increased bilateral cooperation.

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. For example, the government required groups to obtain permission prior to any fundraising activities. Religious groups reported official permission was required for any activities held outside of their place of worship, including charitable activities, and this permission was sometimes difficult to obtain.

In Dubai, representatives of the CDA attended interfaith iftars and suhoors (predawn meals during Ramadan) hosted by several Christian congregations, the Sikh Gurudwara, and the Ismaili Center. Dubai's Al Manara Islamic Center hosted an interfaith iftar, and invited attendees to share their thoughts on the themes of tolerance and happiness. The iftar was broadcast live on the center's website.

Dubai's grand mufti addressed the diverse group of minority religious leaders and diplomats in attendance.

In June 2018 Minister of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation Sheikh Abdullah bin Zayed Al Nahyan visited the Akshardham Hindu temple in New Delhi, India, as part of an official visit.

Prominent government figures and social media influencers routinely acknowledged minority religious holidays using various platforms. For example, Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum, Prime Minister and ruler of Dubai, tweeted wishes for a happy Diwali and encouraged observers to use social media to share pictures of Diwali celebrations around the country.

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

According to non-Muslim groups, there continued to be societal pressure discouraging conversion from Islam and encouraging conversion to Islam. In March the Dubai-based Dar Al Ber Society announced that it had supported the conversion to Islam of 3,014 residents representing 69 nationalities in 2017. During Ramadan, local newspapers published stories portraying conversions to Islam positively and published statistics on conversions to Islam. For example, local media reported that 40 residents converted to Islam at an iftar hosted by the Islamic Information Center (IIC) of Dubai. By contrast, observers reported conversion from Islam was highly discouraged through strong cultural and social pressure, particularly from family members.

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 malls and hotels. The news media continued to print reports of religious holiday celebrations, including religious activities such as Christmas celebrations and Hindu festivals such as Diwali. Decorations and supplies for christenings and other religious events were available in major shopping centers.

Religious literature, primarily related to Islam, was available in stores; however, bookstores generally did not carry core religious works for other faiths, such as the Bible or Hindu sacred texts.

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 hotels, citing government regulatory barriers, were unwilling to rent space for non-Islamic religious purposes, such as weekly church services. Local media reported on difficulties in obtaining bank loans to cover construction costs for new religious spaces, even for registered religious organizations, such as Anglican attempts to fund construction for All Saints Anglican Church in Abu Dhabi.

Anti-Semitic materials were available for purchase at some book fairs and from a major international book retailer. There were continued reports of users posting anti-Semitic remarks on some social media sites and local Arabic print media featured anti-Semitic caricatures in political cartoons. Following the move of the U.S. Embassy to Jerusalem in May, Al-Bayan, a Dubai-based newspaper, ran an editorial cartoon showing the caricature of an orthodox Jew wearing a hat featuring the Star of David and firing a pistol into a grave with a headstone marked “Palestine’s martyrs.”

News reports during the year quoted religious leaders, including from Catholic, Anglican, Hindu, Sikh, and other religious communities, expressing appreciation for government support for their communities and the relative freedom in which their communities could worship. During Ramadan, local media widely covered interfaith iftars hosted by minority faith communities, for example by the Anglican Church in Abu Dhabi.

Because of the limited capacity of official houses of worship, dozens of religious organizations and different sects shared worship space. At the celebration of the 50th anniversary of St. Andrew’s Anglican Church in Abu Dhabi, the minister of tolerance during his keynote address praised the number of different Christian faith groups sharing space and worshipping side by side.

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

In December the U.S. Ambassador at Large for Religious Freedom spoke at the Forum for Promoting Peace in Muslim Societies’ fifth annual conference in Abu Dhabi about advancing religious freedom across the world. In May the Department of State Special Advisor for Religious Minorities, at the invitation of



the Ministry of Tolerance, spoke about U.S. support for Muslim communities as a panel member for the International Conference on Muslim Minorities.

The Ambassador, Charge d’Affaires, Consul General, and other embassy and consulate general officers met with representatives of the Ministry of Tolerance, Dubai’s CDA, IACAD, and other officials during the year. In addition to the implementation of new laws and regulatory practices, officers discussed international, bilateral, and governmental efforts to support religious diversity, inclusiveness, and tolerance, as well as government initiatives to promote moderate Islam. Officers also engaged with government-supported organizations whose official stated purpose was to promote tolerance within and across religions, such as the Forum for Promoting Peace in Muslim Societies.

Embassy and consulate general officers regularly met with representatives of minority religious groups to learn more about issues affecting their communities as part of continuing efforts to monitor their abilities to associate and worship. The embassy and consulate general hosted events that brought together leaders from diverse religious communities, such as the Hindu, Sikh, Christian, and Shia communities, to facilitate the sharing of their experiences with one another, encourage interfaith contact building and dialogue, and demonstrate U.S. support for tolerance and religious freedom. In March in partnership with the Ministry of Tolerance, the U.S. embassy and consulate sponsored the visit of a gospel choir affiliated with Howard University to perform in Abu Dhabi, Dubai, and Fujairah. The choir also sang on local radio and at an event hosted by the minister of tolerance at his *majlis* (salon). In Dubai, the Ismaili Center cohosted the gospel choir for an interfaith concert that was widely covered by local media. Remarks from both U.S. and UAE officials throughout the visit praised mutual efforts to understand different religions and cultures.