

UNITED ARAB EMIRATES 2019 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 September that a Dubai court convicted a Moroccan national of blasphemy and sentenced him to three months imprisonment followed by deportation and a fine of 500,000 dirhams (\$136,000). In February Sharjah Emirate authorities charged two residents with engaging in extramarital sex, in violation of local interpretation of sharia. In March a woman initially convicted of charges related to practicing witchcraft was acquitted after appeal in the emirate of Fujairah. The General Authority of Islamic Affairs and Endowments (Awqaf) continued to provide weekly guidance for the content of sermons in Sunni mosques. Some Shia imams chose to follow Awqaf-approved guidance, while the Dubai-based Jaafari Affairs Council, charged with management of Shia affairs, issued additional instructions to Shia mosques. Christian churches and Hindu and Sikh temples serving the noncitizen population operated on land donated by the ruling families. In September the Abu Dhabi Department of Community Development (DCD) granted licenses, and thereby formal legal status, to 18 Abu Dhabi-based houses of worship, including Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant churches and the country's first traditional Hindu temple. Individuals belonging to non-Islamic faiths otherwise 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 religiously extremist. The government prohibited the dissemination of literature it perceived as supporting religious extremism. 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. In February the government announced construction of the first official synagogue in Abu Dhabi, with construction slated to begin in 2020. In February Pope Francis held a public Mass in Abu Dhabi for 180,000 Catholics as part of the first papal visit to the Arabian Peninsula. The government hosted conferences and

meetings with religious minority leaders throughout the year to promote interfaith tolerance both domestically and internationally.

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 officially recognized houses of worship, although conversion from Islam was strongly discouraged. Conversion to Islam was encouraged, however. In June the Zayed House for Islamic Culture posted a video online featuring new converts to Islam and the religion's role in promoting tolerance and forgiveness. Local newspapers published stories portraying conversions to Islam positively. 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. Local media reported on difficulties in obtaining bank loans to cover construction costs for new religious spaces, including for registered religious organizations.

The U.S. Ambassador at Large for Religious Freedom spoke at a conference in Abu Dhabi on the subject of interfaith tolerance and education. He also met with local officials, including Abu Dhabi Crown Prince Mohamed bin Zayed Al-Nahyan and Minister of Foreign Affairs Abdullah bin Zayed Al-Nahyan. In meetings with senior government counterparts, the Ambassador, Charge d'Affaires, other 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, as well as government initiatives to foster religious tolerance and counter what it considered extremist interpretations of Islam. Embassy and consulate general officials also engaged with a broad range of minority religious groups. The embassy and consulate general in Dubai hosted interfaith events to encourage and support religious freedom and tolerance.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 9.8 million (midyear 2019 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 noncitizen residents, the majority comes 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, 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 of the population is Muslim, 9 percent Christian, and 15 percent from other noncitizen 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 ranges 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. 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. Violations of the law are punishable by one month's imprisonment or a fine not exceeding 2,000 dirhams (\$540). The law prohibits Muslims from drinking alcohol or knowingly eating pork throughout the year.

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 toward religions.

Land ownership by noncitizens is restricted to designated freehold areas. Outside of special economic zones and designated freehold areas, the law restricts majority company ownership to citizens except in certain exempted sectors. 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, 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. In these cases, judges generally impose civil penalties. Higher courts may overturn or modify sharia penalties.

The Fatwa Council, headed by President of the Forum for Promoting Peace in Muslim Societies Sheikh Abdallah bin Bayyah, 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.

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. 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 prison, because 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 usually applies. Strict interpretation of sharia – which often favors the father – does not apply to child custody cases and courts have applied the “the best interests of the child” standard since 2010. 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. 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. 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. In July the DIFC announced non-Muslim residents could register wills covering assets across the country and abroad. Previously, the DIFC only accepted wills with assets in Dubai and 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). Electronic violations of the law are subject to a maximum fine of four million dirhams (\$1.1 million). The law prohibits membership in groups the government designates as terrorist organizations, with penalties up to life imprisonment and capital punishment.

Under the law, 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 defines 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 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 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. As of March, violations of the law are subject to a fine of no less than 50,000 dirhams (\$13,600). Under a 2012 cybercrimes law, the use of any information technology to promote the collection of donations without a license is subject to a fine between 200,000 dirhams (\$54,500) and 500,000 dirhams (\$136,000).

Individuals who donate to unregistered charities and fundraising groups may be punished with a three-year prison term or a fine between 250,000 dirhams (\$68,100) and 500,000 dirhams (\$136,000).

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 media reports, in September the Dubai Criminal Court sentenced a Moroccan national to three months imprisonment, deportation upon completion of his prison sentence, and a fine of 500,000 dirhams (\$136,000) on blasphemy charges for allegedly insulting God in an argument with his employer.

Media reported Dubai courts sentenced a Moroccan woman in August to three months imprisonment and deportation for charges that included blasphemy, for insulting religion in text messages sent to a man with whom she had been romantically involved.

According to media reports, in February, Sharjah officials charged two residents with engaging in extramarital sex, in violation of local interpretation of sharia.

Police and courts continued to enforce laws prohibiting sorcery. Customs authorities in Dubai and the northern emirates reported seizing shipments containing materials they said were intended for use in magic and sorcery. In March a woman was acquitted after appealing charges related to practicing witchcraft. The Fujairah Court of First Instance initially convicted her and ordered her to pay a fine of 10,000 dirhams (\$2,700).

Following a December 31, 2018 court ruling upholding his earlier conviction, the government continued to imprison Ahmed Mansoor, a human rights activist arrested in 2017. Although specifics of the charges against Mansoor remained unknown, authorities stated that, among other violations of the law, Mansoor promoted "a sectarian- and hate-filled agenda."

There were reports of government actions targeting the Muslim Brotherhood, designated by the government as a terrorist organization, and individuals associated with the group. Since 2011, the government also has restricted the activities of organizations and individuals allegedly associated with al-Islah, a

Muslim Brotherhood affiliate. In August the country's president pardoned political activist Osama al-Najjar and two other detainees accused of having ties to al-Islah. Their release was accompanied by a video in which the three detainees renounced their membership and condemned the Muslim Brotherhood as a terrorist organization.

Within prisons, authorities continued to require 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 said 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 an April statement during the Fatwa Council's second annual conference, the council declared the importance of regulating fatwas so that they could "consecrate values of tolerance and coexistence."

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 Awqaf, the government continued to fund Sunni mosques, with the exception of those considered private, and retained all Sunni imams as government employees.

The Awqaf continued to oversee the administration of Sunni mosques, except in Dubai, where they were administered by the Islamic Affairs and Charitable Activities Department (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 sermons; published a Friday sermon script every week; and posted the guidance on its website. Leading up to Ramadan, the Awqaf launched training workshops to instruct imams on sermon delivery and how to communicate values of moderation and tolerance.

The Awqaf applied a three-tier system in which junior 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. Some Shia sheikhs (religious leaders) 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.

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 and appointed by the Dubai ruler, managed Shia affairs for the entire country, including overseeing mosques and community activities, managing financial affairs, and hiring imams. The council complied with the weekly guidance from IACAD and issued additional instructions on sermons to Shia mosques.

The government did not appoint imams 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 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 government permitted Shia Muslims to observe Ashura in private, 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.

Representatives of non-Islamic faiths said registration procedures and requirements for minority religious groups remained unclear in all emirates. In September the Department of Community Development (DCD) in Abu Dhabi granted licenses, and thereby formal legal status, to 18 Abu Dhabi-based houses of worship,

including Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant churches and the country's first traditional Hindu temple. Prior to receiving licenses, the 18 houses of worship operated on informal approval from local authorities. According to the DCD – the regulator of places of worship in Abu Dhabi emirate – the licensing ensured the places of worship had a channel of communication through which to request support on administrative and operational issues affecting religious communities. These changes did not apply to religious groups in the other emirates.

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 and signing leases. For example, the government continued to require 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. Since the September licensing of 18 houses of worship by DCD, community sources reported that unregistered religious organizations faced challenges in renting spaces at hotels in some circumstances. The government permitted groups that chose not to register to carry out religious functions 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 continued reports of delays in obtaining permits from the CDA to worship in spaces outside of government-designated religious compounds. In 2018, the CDA was tasked with implementing an oversight structure for civil institutions and nonprofits and with regulating non-Muslim faith communities in the emirate. Despite changes in personnel since 2018, when the CDA imposed significant restrictions on non-Muslim groups practicing in hotels, there were continued reports of such restrictions as well as confusion and uncertainty regarding CDA policies for obtaining licenses and event permits, which were not published by the CDA. There were also reports of last-minute event cancellations affecting religious groups.

Immigration authorities continued to ask foreigners applying for residence permits to declare their religious affiliation on applications. School applications also continued to ask 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. In February Pope Francis held a public Mass in Abu Dhabi for 180,000 Catholics as part of the first papal visit to the Arabian Peninsula. In April 5,000 worshippers attended a stone-laying ceremony for a Hindu temple.

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. Following the government licensing of 18 Abu Dhabi-based houses of worship, Pujya Brahmavihari Swami, the head priest of the UAE's first Hindu temple, described the event in which the licenses were publicly presented as "a great signal to the world that the way forward for humanity is global inclusiveness where we not only respect each other's beliefs but also accept their existence."

The government continued to provide land for non-Muslim cemeteries. Cremation facilities and associated cemeteries were available for the large Hindu community. Non-Muslim groups said the capacity of 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 individuals from all religious groups except Islam to use the facilities.

In June the Abu Dhabi International Airport opened a new multifaith 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.

Despite legal prohibitions on eating during daylight hours in 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, most licensed restaurants were permitted to offer alcohol during Ramadan. Although private eating establishments historically used curtains or partitions to conceal customers who ate during Ramadan daytime hours, in May, a few days prior to the conclusion of Ramadan, Abu Dhabi authorities ordered the partitions be taken down, thereby allowing restaurants and cafes to serve food openly during Ramadan. Due to confusion in the publication of the Abu Dhabi municipality's instruction, compliance with the order to remove partitions was not universal.

The government did not always enforce the prohibition 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 imported religious materials and occasionally confiscated some of them, such as books. Additionally, customs authorities occasionally 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 texts 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 other than 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.

In a June statement, the Anti-Defamation League (ADL) said the government has “taken significant, constructive steps to advance the theological basis for Muslim coexistence with adherents of other religions, including but not limited to Christians and Jews.” In this regard, the ADL cited the government’s training of thousands of Afghan imams on interreligious coexistence and the appointment of the world’s first cabinet-level minister of tolerance.

During Ramadan, government-owned companies sponsored programs featuring speakers that the ADL had cited for past anti-Semitic comments. A government-owned radio station broadcast a program featuring Saleh Al-Maghemsy, a Saudi Sunni Islamic scholar, and the Dubai Electricity and Water Authority hosted a presentation by Omar Abdel Kafi, an Egyptian writer active on the international lecture and television circuit. In a letter to the director general of the UN Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), the Simon Wiesenthal Center stated the November UNESCO-sponsored Sharjah International Book Fair featured a number of anti-Semitic titles, including “Mein Kampf” and “Protocols of the Elders of Zion.”

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 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. Because of the limited capacity of official houses of worship, dozens of religious organizations and different groups shared worship 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 attracted tens of thousands of worshippers to the 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 generally make 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 42 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 gathered in other spaces, such as hotels.

There were 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 2022. 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 Dubai villa that was publicly acknowledged as a worship space in a 2018 *Bloomberg* article. In May at an event cohosted with the UAE Embassy in Washington, the ADL announced the country's expatriate Jewish community had selected its first chief rabbi. In February the government announced construction of the first official synagogue in the country, in Abu Dhabi, with construction scheduled to begin in 2020 as part of the larger Abrahamic Family House – a project slated to bring together a mosque, church, and synagogue to represent the three Abrahamic faiths. Construction was halfway complete on a new Anglican church in Abu Dhabi; the projected completion date was not clear at year's end.

Although the government permitted non-Muslim groups to raise money from their congregations and from abroad, 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 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.

Marriages between non-Muslim men and Muslim women are not recognized under the law and are thus considered invalid. In April the government issued its first birth certificate for an interfaith baby, in this case born to a Muslim mother and a Hindu father. The request, initially rejected by authorities, was deemed an exception.

In February the government hosted the Muslim Council of Elders' Global Conference on Human Fraternity, which brought together Pope Francis, Grand Imam of al Azhar Ahmed al-Tayyib, and religious leaders from across the region to discuss interfaith cooperation and dialogue. During the conference, Pope Francis and Grand Imam al-Tayyib signed the *Document on Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together*-- a declaration of reconciliation, cooperation, tolerance, and fraternity among believers and non-believers. In August the

government formed a multifaith committee tasked with implementing the document. In a subsequent statement to the UN Human Rights Council, the NGO International Organization for the Least Developed Countries declared the government has “been able to offer a unique model of tolerance and dialogue between religions, cultures, and civilizations based on mutual respect. Consequently, tolerance has become an integral part of the structure of the UAE’s society and has been characterized by the establishment of a culture of human coexistence.”

In April the government hosted scholars and religious leaders as part of the International Tolerance Convention hosted by Dubai’s Al Manar Center to discuss fostering peace and curbing extremism related to religion.

In January the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation condemned the terrorist attack on churches and hotels in Sri Lanka and stated the country stood against violence, extremism, and religious discrimination.

In March Sheikh Hamad bin Mohammed Al Sharqi, the ruler of Fujairah, received Bishop Mor Osthathos Issac, Patriarchal Vicar of the Jacobite Syrian Orthodox Church in India, and spoke about the importance of tolerance and respect for other cultures.

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 their place of worship, including charitable activities, and this permission was sometimes difficult to obtain.

The Dubai government’s Al Manar Islamic Center hosted an interfaith iftar, and invited attendees to share their thoughts on the themes of tolerance and happiness.

Prominent government figures routinely acknowledged minority religious holidays and promoted messages of tolerance through various print and media platforms. In October UAE Vice President, Prime Minister, and Ruler of Dubai Mohammed bin Rashid wished UAE's Hindu community a happy Diwali in a social media message that was amplified in the local press.

In November the government conferred the “UAE Pioneer” award on two Christian expatriates, an Indian businessman, Saji Cheriyan, and Anglican clergyman Reverend Canon Andrew Thompson, chaplain of St. Andrew’s Church in Abu Dhabi, for their work in promoting interreligious tolerance in 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 June the Zayed House for Islamic Culture posted a video online featuring new converts to Islam and the religion’s role in promoting tolerance and forgiveness. Local newspapers published stories portraying conversions to Islam positively. For example, local media reported that nine prisoners converted to Islam in a public ceremony at a Sharjah police station after the local Department of Islamic Affairs organized proselytizing sessions at the prison. 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, hotels, and major shopping centers. The news media continued to print reports of religious holiday celebrations, including activities such as Christmas celebrations and Hindu festivals such as Diwali.

Religious literature, primarily related to Islam, was available in stores; however, bookstores generally did not carry the core religious works of 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 difficulties in obtaining bank loans to cover construction costs for new religious spaces, including for registered religious organizations.

There were continued reports of users posting anti-Semitic remarks on some social media sites. In March Twitter users circulated an anti-Semitic message alleging Jewish control of media outlets in the United States.

During Ramadan, local media widely covered interfaith iftars hosted by minority faith communities, including at St. Paul's Church in Abu Dhabi, which hosted an iftar and Maghrib prayer for 500, mostly Muslim, blue-collar workers, and Dubai's Sikh temple, which hosted nightly interfaith iftars.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

In February as a follow-up to the 2018 Ministerial to Advance Religious Freedom, the U.S. Department of State and the Ministry of Tolerance (MOT) cochaired the first regional conference to advance religious freedom, entitled "Interfaith Tolerance Education to Combat Extremism." In his keynote speech, the U.S. Ambassador at Large for Religious Freedom spoke about promoting education in the context of religious freedom and interfaith tolerance as a means of countering extremist ideology. The Special Advisor for Religious Minorities moderated a panel on how to set standards for textbooks and curricula that promote tolerance and interfaith understanding.

The Ambassador, Charge d'Affaires, Consul General, and other Department of State, embassy, and consulate general officers met with representatives of the MOT, Abu Dhabi's DCD, and Dubai's CDA during the year. In addition to the implementation of new laws, licensing procedures, and regulatory practices, officers discussed international, bilateral, and governmental efforts to support religious diversity, inclusiveness, and tolerance, as well as government initiatives to promote what the government believed were moderate interpretations of Islam. Embassy representatives also engaged with government-supported organizations, such as the Forum for Promoting Peace in Muslim Societies, whose official purpose was to promote tolerance within and across religions.

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, encourage interfaith contact building and dialogue, and demonstrate U.S. support for tolerance and religious freedom. During one of the events, religious leaders developed the idea

for the book *Celebrating Tolerance: Religious Diversity in the United Arab Emirates*, a text edited by Reverend Thompson and published in February, which celebrates and charts the experiences and coexistence of different religious faiths in the country. In May the embassy partnered with the Emirates Red Crescent to host community iftars as part of its Ramadan outreach activities. Remarks by both U.S. and local officials throughout the year praised mutual efforts to understand different religions and cultures.