

UNITED ARAB EMIRATES 2017 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. The law prohibits blasphemy, proselytizing by non-Muslims, and conversion from Islam. An antidiscrimination law includes prohibitions on religious discrimination, but also criminalizes acts the government interprets as provoking religious hatred or insulting religions. There were cases of individuals accused of blasphemy during the year; in July a Dubai court convicted a Lebanese businessman of blasphemy, fining, imprisoning, and sentencing him to deportation. 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 to Shia mosques across all emirates except Dubai, where mosques are overseen by Dubai's Islamic Affairs and Charitable Activities Department (IACAD). Individuals belonging to non-Islamic faiths said they could worship in private without government interference but faced 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. The Abu Dhabi Department of Justice signed an agreement with Christian leadership to allow churches to handle non-Islamic marriages and divorces. 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. Noncitizen religious groups said capacity was still insufficient, however, to meet demand. Regulatory requirements sometimes limited the ability of religious organizations to rent space for worship and limited the ability to engage in certain charitable activities. The minister of state for tolerance organized a meeting with regional Christian leaders at the site of an early Christian monastery. In an October cabinet reshuffle, Vice President and Prime Minister Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum announced that the position of minister of state for tolerance was being elevated to minister of tolerance.

According to non-Muslim religious groups, there was a high degree of tolerance within society for minority religious beliefs and traditions, although societal attitudes and behavior discouraged conversion from Islam. 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 sites.

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. The embassy and consulate general hosted interfaith events to encourage and support religious freedom and tolerance, engaging with various religious communities as concrete demonstrations of the importance of interfaith dialogue.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 6.1 million (July 2017 estimate). The UN estimates the total population is 9.4 million (2017 estimate). The most recent estimate from the country's National Bureau of Statistics is 9.1 million (December 2016). There has been no nationwide population census since 2005.

Approximately 11 percent of the resident 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 the breakdown between Sunni and Shia Muslims among noncitizen residents, media estimates suggest less than 20 percent of the noncitizen Muslim population are Shia.

Of the total population (both citizen and noncitizen), the 2005 census found 76 percent to be Muslim, 9 percent Christian, and 15 percent from other religious groups comprising mainly Hindus and Buddhists, but also including Parsis, Bahais, 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 (AED) (\$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 AED (\$68,000) to two million AED (\$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. 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. A small number of Christian-affiliated schools are authorized 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.

The law restricts land ownership to citizens, or companies majority-owned by citizens. This effectively prevents 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, the law grants child custody to the Muslim father. Non-Muslim wives of citizens are also 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.

In November the Emirate of Abu Dhabi’s judicial department signed an agreement with Christian leaders to legally mediate divorces for non-Muslims, provided that the bride and groom are both residents of the emirate. Under the previous system, persons filing for divorce would undergo mandatory mediation sessions with court counsellors, often with Arabic interpreters. Church officials are permitted to officiate at weddings for non-Muslims, but the marriage certificate must still be

obtained 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. The Abu Dhabi judicial system opened a non-Muslim wills office in August allowing non-Muslims to register their wills 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 Court Wills and Probate Registry opened a virtual registry in October, to support overseas investors. Dubai wills not filed in the DIFC Court are subject to sharia. A 2016 agreement provides for the mutual enforcement of judgments between the Ras Al Khaimah courts and the DIFC Court, extending DIFC jurisdiction to the Emirate of Ras al Khaimah. In May the Abu Dhabi government established two new courts for Personal Status and 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 AED (\$136,000) to one million AED (\$272,000). The law prohibits membership in groups the government designates as terrorist organizations, with penalties up to life imprisonment and capital punishment.

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.

Dubai authorities passed a law in July designating the Community Development Authority (CDA) as 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 AED (\$140) to 100,000 AED (\$27,200).

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

Government Practices

Summary paragraph: Authorities conducted arrests under blasphemy and antidiscrimination laws that criminalize insulting religions. The Awqaf continued to provide weekly guidance for the content of sermons in Sunni mosques, and the government regulated and actively monitored the issuance of all fatwas at both the national and emirate levels. Shia mosques continued to receive guidance from the Awqaf but were considered private and managed primarily by the Jaafari Affairs Council, located in Dubai. The government continued to allow private worship of other religious groups and granted permission to build houses of worship on a case-by-case basis.

In July the Dubai Court of First Instance convicted a Lebanese businessman of blasphemy and threatening his former business partner, after he sent several text messages in which he cursed God and threatened the partner, an Emirati man. The businessman was jailed, fined 500,000 AED (\$136,000), and sentenced to deportation after his three-month prison sentence was completed.

The Dubai Court of First Instance acquitted a Filipino man in February of offending Islam by characterizing it as a religion of terror and calling Muslims terrorists, following an argument with his roommate. The court cited a lack of corroborating evidence in announcing the acquittal.

Within prisons, the authorities required Muslims to attend weekly Islamic services. In Abu Dhabi, Christian clergy reported difficulties visiting Christian prisoners.

In September an American citizen and associate professor of journalism at a U.S. university wrote a newspaper op-ed piece stating that he believed the government had denied him a visa to teach at the university's branch in Abu Dhabi because he was Shia. The individual said that at least one other faculty member from his university, also a U.S. citizen with a Shia background, had been denied a security clearance to teach in Abu Dhabi.

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

In March the government sentenced activist Nassir bin Ghaith to 10 years in prison. According to human rights organizations, among the charges authorities filed against him in 2016 were ridiculing the government's decision to grant land for a Hindu temple.

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.

The federal Awqaf continued to oversee the administration of Sunni mosques, except in Dubai, where they are administered by the IACAD. On its website, the Awqaf stated its goals included offering "religious guidance in the UAE [United Arab Emirates] 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.

The Jaafari Affairs Council managed Shia affairs for all of the country, including overseeing mosques and endowments. The council complied with the weekly guidance from IACAD and issued additional instructions on sermons to Shia mosques.

The Awqaf operated official toll-free call centers and a text messaging service for fatwas, or religious rulings, 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 Awqaf continued to vet and appoint Sunni imams, except in Dubai, based on their 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. Including Dubai, the federal government reported more than 6,700 total Sunni mosques in the UAE. 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. As of 2012, 478 of the mosques were considered private.

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 government continued to allow Shia mosques to broadcast the Shia call to prayer from their minarets. Shia Muslims had their own council, the Jaafari Affairs Council, to manage Shia affairs, including overseeing mosques and community activities, managing financial affairs, and hiring preachers. The government permitted Shia Muslims to observe Ashura in private, but not in public.

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 a formal place of worship, such as a temple, mosque, or church, 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.

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. 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 could worship and practice without government interference within designated compounds or buildings, or in private facilities or homes. The government, however, did not allow non-Muslims to worship, preach, or conduct prayers in public.

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 capacity in cremations 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 January a South African man and his Ukrainian fiancée living in the UAE were imprisoned for violating the UAE's interpretation of sharia by engaging in extramarital sex when a doctor discovered that the fiancée was pregnant. After being held for approximately five weeks, the authorities dropped all charges, and the couple was released.

In June Abu Dhabi Crown Prince Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahyan ordered that his namesake mosque, located next to a complex of churches in the capital, be called Mary, Mother of Jesus Mosque, to promote interreligious understanding.

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.

In spite of legal prohibitions on eating during daytime hours of Ramadan, in Dubai, 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.

The government did not always enforce the law against bell towers and crosses on churches, and some churches displayed crosses on their buildings or had bell towers, but with no ringing or chiming of bells.

Customs authorities continued to review the content of religious materials imported into the country and occasionally confiscated religious materials, such as books. Additionally, sometimes customs authorities denied or delayed entry to passengers carrying items deemed intended for sorcery. Specific items airport inspectors reportedly confiscated included amulets, animal bones, spells, knives, and containers of blood. According to media reports, in 2017 Dubai Airport Customs disrupted at least 13 attempts to smuggle items related to sorcery and witchcraft. Police and courts also continued to enforce laws against sorcery. For example, in Abu Dhabi Emirate a man who said he was offering services such as treating evil spirits and infertility was arrested and charged with practicing sorcery and fraud.

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 what it considered 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.

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 40 Christian churches, 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 were the only emirates without dedicated land for Christian churches, although congregations did gather in other spaces, such as hotels.

Two Hindu temples and one Sikh temple operated in Dubai. The government allocated land in Al-Wathba, Abu Dhabi, for the construction of a Hindu temple,

which was not yet finished by the end of the year. 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 Dubai. Construction began on a new Anglican church in Abu Dhabi; the projected completion date is not clear.

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. 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. .

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.

In the executive cabinet reorganization in October, Vice President and Prime Minister of the UAE and Ruler of Dubai, Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum, announced that the position of minister of state for tolerance became minister of tolerance, and appointed Sheikh Nahyan bin Mubarak Al Nahyan to the position. In November the minister announced that the ministry would be focused on four areas: community awareness, building community relations supporting tolerance and peaceful coexistence, performing activities and events promoting tolerance, and performing research and creating indexes to monitor implementation and measure desired outcomes.

On multiple occasions, government leaders issued public statements condemning extremist activities. For example, in November the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation condemned the attack on a mosque in Egypt, stating "This horrible crime ... exposes the false allegations of extremist groups, which don the cloak of religion to justify their barbaric acts, which Islam is innocent from."

In June Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum issued a law establishing the International Institute for Tolerance and the Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum Tolerance Award.

In April then-Minister of State for Tolerance Sheikha Lubna bint Khalid Al Qasimi visited the Vatican and was received by Pope Francis. She also met with the president of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue. Local media reported that discussions included cooperation on promoting the value of tolerance globally and the importance of emphasizing the equality of all people.

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.

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.

The government engaged with religious minorities frequently. In January the Ministry of Tolerance hosted an event for 30 Christian leaders from nine denominations located throughout the Gulf; the event took place at the site of an early Christian monastery on Sir Bani Yas Island in Abu Dhabi Emirate. In addressing the group, the minister of state for tolerance noted, “This site is a symbol of the diversity we have in the UAE ... Nations develop and flourish when they accept differences and work on their similarities.”

In February the Emirates Association for Human Rights hosted a regional conference on combating intolerance, extremism, and incitement of hatred. Representatives of civil society and government organizations from various Arab countries attended the event.

In May the Forum for Promoting Peace in Muslim Societies, an organization sponsored by the government but with nominal independence, initiated and received the first American Caravan for Peace, consisting of 30 prominent leaders from Muslim, Christian, and Jewish clergy. The caravan discussed mutual visions, challenges, and opportunities of coexistence, including fostering tolerance and the role of religion in public life. In his address to the caravan, forum president Sheikh

Abdallah bin Bayyah stated “All Abrahamic religions carry fundamental teachings that promote coexistence and peace, and the universal quality of human dignity. These teachings can form powerful antidotes to extremism, and an effective approach to counter hatred, Islamophobia, and religious extremism together.” In December the forum hosted its fourth annual conference in Abu Dhabi that included more than 700 Islamic scholars and interfaith participants with a focus on combating anti-Muslim sentiment.

In June Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum declared, “Since its establishment, the UAE has promoted the values of tolerance, coexistence, acceptance, and openness, and has become a safe haven for people from all over the world who can find it a place without discrimination based on religion, race, gender, or color.”

In September hundreds of people of different faiths and nationalities participated in the UN International Day of Peace at Dubai’s Sikh Gurudwara. Sheikha Lubna Bint Khalid Al Qasimi, the chief guest at the event, said, “Here in the UAE, we believe that tolerance is the backbone of all civilizations, religions, and cultures.”

There were reports of permitting delays and event cancellations affecting religious groups due to difficulties of the Dubai Community Development Authority in implementing the new law to oversee all civil institutions and nonprofits in the emirate.

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, including in the workplace. For example, some non-Muslim women reportedly faced pressure from family and friends to convert to Islam following marriage to a Muslim.

During Ramadan, local newspapers published stories portraying conversions to Islam positively and published statistics on conversions to Islam. For example, the Kalemah Islamic Centre reported that 341 foreign residents had converted to Islam between June 2016 and June 2017. During Ramadan, the Abu Dhabi e-government portal offered guidance on how to become a Muslim. 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. News reports highlighted the existence of pre-Islamic religious archeological sites in the country, such as a 7th century Christian monastery marked with tourism signage on Sir Bani Yas Island. The minister of state for tolerance's and Christian leadership's visit to Sir Bani Yas Island in January was also widely covered in regional and local media. Christian leaders lauded the role of the country's first president, Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahyan, in preserving the Christian ruins.

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 worship services. Local media reported on difficulties in obtaining bank loans to cover construction costs for religious spaces, even for registered religious organizations. This remained a problem in constructing a new Anglican church, according to local clergy.

Anti-Semitic materials were available for purchase at some book fairs and from a major international book retailer. Human rights organizations criticized the publication of an anti-Semitic article in *Al-Khaleej* newspaper in April, which contained blood libel accusations that Jews used the blood of Christians in religious rituals. They also noted cartoons invoking anti-Semitic themes, which appeared in *Al Bayan*. There were continued reports of users posting anti-Semitic remarks on some social media sites.

According to religious groups, there was a high degree of acceptance and tolerance within society, including among both citizens and noncitizens, for diverse religious beliefs. News reports during the year quoted religious leaders, including from Catholic, Anglican, Hindu, Sikh, and other religious communities, positively portraying government support for their communities and the relative freedom in

which they could worship. The media reported the Egyptian Coptic Church in Abu Dhabi and the Sikh Gurudwara Temple hosted interfaith iftars in Dubai during Ramadan. At the iftar hosted by the Sikh Gurudwara, Gurudwara Darbar Chairman Surender Singh Kandhari stated, “In a world that struggles with extremism, the best way to cut it is through creating friendships among different faiths and nationalities and making the difference ourselves. It is only through communication that we can overcome adversities.”

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

The U.S. government discussed religious freedom and promoting tolerance at the highest levels of government. The Ambassador and other embassy and consulate general officers met with representatives of the Ministry of Tolerance, the Awqaf, IACAD, and other officials. 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 what the government believed were moderate interpretations of Islam, such as the Tabah Foundation, and promoting tolerance within and across religions, such as the Forum for Promoting Peace in Muslim Societies. The U.S. Government closely monitored foreign organizations for possible terrorist activity; during the reporting period, the Muslim Brotherhood did not meet U.S. statutory criteria to be designated as a foreign terrorist organization.

Embassy and consulate general officers 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 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.