

UNITED ARAB EMIRATES 2020 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution states that Islam is the country's 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 and proselytizing by non-Muslims. An antidiscrimination law includes prohibitions on religious discrimination and criminalizes acts the government interprets as provoking religious hatred or insulting religions. According to media reports in January, Dubai courts fined three Sri Lankan men 500,000 dirhams (\$136,000) each and ordered them deported for insulting Islam in social media posts. In September, the Dubai Public Prosecution filed blasphemy charges against an Arab man after an altercation with police in which he reportedly insulted Islam. In January, local media reported Dubai courts sentenced a Jordanian man in absentia to three months in prison, fined him 500,000 dirhams (\$136,000), and ordered him deported after the courts determined that he insulted Islam in WhatsApp messages. The General Authority of Islamic Affairs and Endowments (Awqaf) continued to provide weekly guidance for the content of sermons in Sunni mosques with the stated purpose of limited the spread of what the authorities characterize as extremist ideology. 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. The Abu Dhabi Emirate implemented a three-tier authorization system for regulating non-Islamic houses of worship by issuing licenses to houses of worship, permits to denominations seeking authorization to operate under the licensed house of worship, and visas to the religious leaders of these denominations. Under the system, licensed Abu Dhabi-based houses of worship independently vet these denominations and their religious leaders, and formally recommend to the Abu Dhabi Department of Community Development (DCD) whether it should issue a permit to the denomination. A new Abu Dhabi guideline requiring religious leaders to work in the ministry full-time and be sufficiently credentialed in order to obtain a clergy visa posed a challenge for the numerous religious leaders who serve their congregations on a volunteer or part-time basis or who do not have a theology degree, and led to the denial of permits to leaders of some groups. 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. Regulatory requirements sometimes limited the ability of religious organizations to rent space for worship and limited certain charitable activities. In April, Dubai's government granted The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Church of Jesus Christ) a land concession at the Expo 2020 site, which Dubai will hand over after the event's conclusion in 2022. COVID-19 related restrictions disproportionately impacted unlicensed religious organizations that normally congregated in cinemas and hotels but could no longer do so as a result of social distancing regulations and closures. A phased reopening of all houses of worship began with mosques.

The press reported that a man identified as a citizen of a Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) country tried to burn his grandmother alive because he believed she was using black magic to turn him into a woman. A court sentenced him to three years in prison and ordered him to pay 50,000 dirhams (\$13,600) to the victim. In April, the press reported an Indian manager at an Abu Dhabi firm posted graphic anti-Islamic images on Facebook showing how the "jihadi" coronavirus could cause exponentially more deaths than explosives. His employer told the press that he would investigate the incident. An employer fired an Indian worker in Dubai and referred the case to police after the individual ridiculed Muslim worshippers in a Facebook posting about COVID-19. The press reported that three other Indians, in separate incidents, had been disciplined by their employers in Dubai and Sharjah for social media posts deemed offensive to Islam. In one case, the employer referred the matter to police. 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 the houses of worship officially recognized by the Abu Dhabi government in 2019, although conversion from Islam was strongly discouraged. Conversion to Islam was encouraged, however. 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. On September 17, Dubai's first kosher restaurant opened in the Burj Khalifa, a local landmark and the world's tallest building, and the country's first Jewish wedding was held in Dubai on December 1.

The Ambassador, Charge d’Affaires, visiting U.S. government officials, and embassy and consulate general officers met with representatives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, the DCD, and the Department of Culture and Tourism during the year. In meetings with government authorities, U.S. officials discussed issues related to the promotion of religious tolerance and emphasized the U.S. government’s commitment to religious freedom. In addition to discussing the implementation of licensing procedures, regulatory practices, and interfaith education and training, officers discussed international, bilateral, and governmental efforts to support religious diversity, inclusiveness, and tolerance as well as host government initiatives to promote what it believed were moderate interpretations of Islam. Embassy and consulate general officers also engaged with a broad range of minority religious groups as part of continuing efforts to monitor their abilities to associate and worship. Remarks by both U.S. and local officials throughout the year praised efforts to build mutual understanding among different religions and cultures.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 10 million (midyear 2020 estimate). Approximately 11 percent 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 on the percentage of the noncitizen population who are 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 to be 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 remainder 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 constitution states that the country is an independent, sovereign, and federal state comprised of seven emirates.

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; but the penal code’s blasphemy provisions punish behavior viewed as contemptuous of the Quran and the Prophet Muhammad or offensive to Islamic teachings.

The law provides for imprisonment of up to five years for preaching against Islam or proselytizing to Muslims. 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 that generally ranges from five to 10 years or more.

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 prohibits any form of expression, including through broadcasting, printed media, or the internet, that the government determines is contradictory to Islam as well as literature it deems blasphemous or offensive toward religions.

Federal law does not require religious organizations to register or obtain a license to practice, although 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 and licensing of non-Muslim religious organizations and the process differs by emirate, organization, and circumstance; these procedures are not published by the emirate governments. The

federal government has also granted some religious organizations land in free-trade zones, where they legally registered by applying for a trade license that allows them some operational functions. In Dubai, religious organizations are required to obtain a license from the Community Development Authority (CDA). The governments of the emirates of Abu Dhabi and Dubai also require religious communities to obtain permits for certain activities, including holding public events and worshipping in temporarily rented spaces, such as hotels.

The federal 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 government announced a series of legal reforms in November decriminalizing the consumption of alcohol but had not published the text of the reforms by year's end. Despite legal prohibitions on eating during daylight hours during Ramadan, most local authorities across the country grant exemptions allowing non-Muslims to eat during the day in malls, hotels, and some stand-alone restaurants.

The federal law prohibits churches from erecting bell towers or displaying crosses or other religious symbols on the outside of their premises, although they may place signs on their properties indicating they are churches.

Islamic studies are mandatory for all students in public schools and for Muslim students in private schools. The government does not provide instruction in any religion other than Islam in public schools. In private schools, non-Muslim students are not required to attend Islamic study classes. All students, however, are required to take national social studies classes, which include teaching on Islam. The government permits Christian-affiliated schools to provide instruction tailored to the religious background of the student; 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, defaming any religion, or contravening the country's ethics and beliefs face potential penalties, including closure. All private schools, regardless of religious affiliation, must register with the government. Private schools are required to have a license from the federal Ministry of Education, and their curriculum must be consistent with a plan of operation submitted to and approved by the ministry. Administrative oversight of the schools is a responsibility of each emirate's government.

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, that wish to purchase 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. Violations of the law carry penalties of five years' imprisonment and a fine of up to one million dirhams (\$272,000).

According to the constitution, sharia is the principal source of legislation, although the judicial system applies both sharia and civil law, depending on the case. Sharia forms the basis for judicial decisions in most family law matters for Muslims, such as marriage 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.

In November, the country's President announced decrees amending the federal laws on personal status, civil transactions, the penal code, and criminal procedures. Amendments to the penal code and criminal procedure law repealed "the article giving [a] reduced (lenient) sentence in what are called honor crimes." "Honor" killings will henceforth be treated as normal murder cases. In other amendments, noncitizens may choose not to apply sharia in cases involving divorce and inheritance, and other acts "that do not harm others," leaving to prosecutors and judges to define those specific acts.

The Fatwa Council, headed by the president of the Forum for Promoting Peace in Muslim Societies, is tasked with presenting a clear image of Islam, including

issuing general fatwas and licensing individuals to issue fatwas, train muftis, and conduct research, in coordination with the Awqaf.

Under the law, citizen and noncitizen Muslim men may marry non-Muslim women who are “people of the book” (Christian or Jewish). Muslim women may not marry non-Muslim men. Marriages between non-Muslim men and Muslim women are not recognized under the law; 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; any extramarital sex between persons of any religion is subject to the same penalties.

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.

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

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 Judicial Department. In both cases of marriage and divorce, the church official must be registered with the Abu Dhabi Department of Community Development as officially recognized to perform these acts.

Noncitizens may register wills in the emirate in which they live. In November, the government announced changes to the personal status laws allowing the general terms of a will to be dealt with according to the law of the country specified in the will or, in cases where a country is not specified in the will, the law of the deceased

person's country of nationality. This is not applicable to property purchased in the UAE, however, which remains subject to UAE law. The government had not published the text of these reforms by year's end. 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, which may cover assets held in the UAE as well as abroad. 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. 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. Punishment may 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 (\$1.09 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. Violations of the law are subject to a fine of no less than 50,000 dirhams (\$13,600). Under the cybercrimes law, the use of any information technology to promote the collection of any type of

donation 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).

In Abu Dhabi, the General Authority of Islamic Affairs and Endowments is entrusted with overseeing Muslim religious affairs across mosques, sermons, imam tutelage, and publications. Non-Muslim religious affairs fall under the mandate of the DCD, which regulates, licenses, and oversees non-Islamic houses of worship, religious leaders, religious events organized outside houses of worship, and fundraising activities across the emirate.

The 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 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 January, Dubai courts fined three Sri Lankan men 500,000 dirhams (\$136,000) each and ordered their deportation for insulting Islam in social media posts. In September, Dubai Public Prosecution filed blasphemy charges against an Arab man after an altercation with police in which he reportedly insulted Islam. In January, local media reported Dubai courts sentenced a Jordanian man in absentia to three months in prison, fined him 500,000 dirhams (\$136,000), and ordered him deported for insulting Islam in WhatsApp messages.

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. According to media reports, in late 2019, Abu Dhabi police arrested a European national for charges of witchcraft and fraud; the subsequent status of his case remained unknown. In February, local press reported Dubai Customs prevented 22

attempts in 2019 to smuggle material local authorities believed were related to witchcraft and sorcery.

Following a 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.

Within prisons, authorities continued to require Muslims to attend weekly Islamic services. In Abu Dhabi, some Christian clergy again 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 websites 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 ones with information on Christianity, atheism, and testimonies of former Muslims who converted to Christianity. Following the normalization of relations between the UAE and Israel, the government unblocked some websites containing information on Judaism.

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.

In January, the Sheikh Zayed Grand Mosque in Abu Dhabi announced on Instagram that well-known preacher and television personality Waseem Youssef was no longer an imam and preacher at the mosque. Although the reason for Youssef's removal was not provided, according to the press it was tied to lawsuits that Youssef pursued against 19 individuals for "defamation" on social media, following his comments questioning the validity of one of the canonical sources of the hadith. The lawsuits culminated in the court finding four defendants guilty of defaming Youssef while dismissing the remaining cases.

Following these civil trials, in February, private citizens filed a civil law suit against Youssef in the Abu Dhabi criminal court, charging him under the cybercrime law with promoting ideas and programs that spread hatred and racism and harm national unity and social peace. Youssef maintained his innocence. In March, the court decreed in March that the case was outside its jurisdiction and referred it to federal prosecutors for further review. The government took no action in this regard.

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 and licensing procedures and requirements for minority religious groups remained unclear in all emirates. The federal 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. The governments of individual emirates 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.

The Abu Dhabi Department of Community Development (DCD) implemented a new three-tier system of authorization for regulating non-Islamic houses of worship. Under the system, the DCD issues licenses to houses of worship, permits to denominations seeking authorization to operate under the licensed house of worship, and visas to the religious leaders of these denominations. Licensed Abu Dhabi-based houses of worship independently vet these denominations and their religious leaders and formally recommend to the DCD whether it should issue a permit to the denomination. The establishment of this system followed a 2019 DCD decision to grant licenses, and thereby formal legal status, to 18 Abu Dhabi-based houses of worship, including Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant churches

and the emirate's first traditional Hindu temple. These changes did not apply to religious groups in the other emirates.

In August, Dubai's Jewish community publicly announced that it was negotiating with the Dubai government for an official license.

The new Abu Dhabi guideline instituted in late 2019 and early 2020 requiring religious leaders to work in the ministry full time and be sufficiently credentialed in order to obtain a clergy visa posed a challenge for religious leaders who serve their congregations on a volunteer or part-time basis or who do not have a theology degree. Under the system, licensed Abu Dhabi-based houses of worship independently vet these denominations and their religious leaders, and formally recommend to the DCD whether it should issue a permit to the denomination. Some religious community members expressed concern that the new system discriminated against smaller and less-recognized denominations.

Since the September 2019 licensing of 18 houses of worship by the 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. COVID-19 related restrictions, however, disproportionately impacted unlicensed religious organizations that normally congregated in cinemas and hotels but could no longer do so as a result of social distancing regulations and closures.

As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, in early March, the government instituted a nationwide mandatory suspension of group prayers at all mosques, churches, and temples, followed by the ordered closure of all houses of worship in the UAE. From July through September, the Abu Dhabi and Dubai governments began the phased reopening of houses of worship, beginning with mosques and then non-Islamic houses of worship. Houses of worship located in labor camps and industrial zones, which included more than half of all churches located in Abu Dhabi and Al-Ain, were the last to receive permission to open.

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.

The CDA oversees civil institutions, nonprofits, and non-Muslim faith communities in the emirate. There were continued reports of 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.

In May, the CDA ordered St. Mary's Catholic Church in Dubai to cease online live-streamed masses until it obtained a permit, following the government-ordered closure of religious facilities across the UAE due to the COVID-19 pandemic. St. Mary's subsequently obtained a permit, and the CDA allowed live-streamed masses to resume. COVID-19 restrictions continue to restrict the activities of some churches in Dubai, including the Catholic and Anglican communities. While these churches were allowed to reopen at the same time as other religious facilities, local regulations prohibited practices such as receiving communion due to concerns these practices would contribute to the spread of COVID-19. Despite the closure of houses of worship as a result of COVID-19, the Abu Dhabi government encouraged non-Islamic houses of worship to live-stream services for major holidays, such as Easter.

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, worshippers attended a prayer ceremony marking the start of the construction of Abu Dhabi's Hindu temple.

News reports during the year quoted religious leaders, including from the Catholic, Anglican, and Hindu communities, expressing appreciation for government support for their communities and the relative freedom in which their communities could worship. Following a meeting in Abu Dhabi between UAE Foreign Minister Abdullah bin Zayed al-Nahyan and members of the Bochasanwasi Akshar Purushotta Swaminarayan Sanstha (BAPS) Hindu community, the BAPS said the

meeting “spoke volumes” about the UAE leadership’s “vision and commitment for a more inclusive, more peaceful, and harmonious future.”

The government continued to provide land for non-Islamic cemeteries. Cremation facilities and associated cemeteries were available for the large Hindu community. Non-Muslim groups said the capacity of 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 crematoriums.

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.

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. In addition, 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, 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 a 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.

Except in the judiciary and military, religious minorities (including Shia Muslims) did not serve in senior federal positions.

In October, the Federal Supreme Court upheld a sentence of 100 lashes in an adultery case involving an unmarried Muslim man and woman who confessed to having illicit sex in one of the northern emirates. The court stated, “Article 1 of the Penal Code under the provisions of Islamic Sharia law stipulates giving 100 lashes and expatriation or distancing for a period of one year to an unmarried person.” Although the pair challenged the ruling, both the court of appeal and the Federal Supreme Court based in Abu Dhabi upheld the flogging sentence.

In October, the press reported that the government was considering a proposal to provide additional housing grants and loans to men who take second and third wives.

In November, the Simon Wiesenthal Center sent a letter to the Emir of Sharjah reporting that the Sharjah International Book Fair, held November 4-14, included displays of anti-Semitic books, including *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, *Mein Kampf*, and other titles. The Wiesenthal Center sent similar letters to the country’s UNESCO representative and to the Ministry of Culture. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs requested a list of the anti-Semitic titles and vowed to work with the book fair authorities and other relevant ministries to address and prevent the presence of such books in the future.

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

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, sometimes in private homes. In Dubai, overcrowding of the emirate’s two church compounds was especially pronounced,

and routinely led to congestion and traffic. Some smaller congregations met in private locations or shared space with other churches to which rulers had given land. Noncitizen groups with land grants did not pay rent on the property. Several emirates also continued to provide free utilities for religious buildings.

Noncitizens, who generally made up the entire membership of minority religious groups, relied on grants and permission from local rulers to build houses of worship. For these groups, land titles remained in the respective ruler's name. The country's Christian churches were all built on land donated by the ruling families of the emirates in which they were located, including houses of worship for Catholics, Coptic Orthodox, Greek Orthodox, Anglicans, and other denominations. Ajman and Umm Al Quwain remained the only emirates without dedicated land for Christian churches, although congregations gathered in other spaces, such as hotels. In April, Dubai's government granted the Church of Jesus Christ a land concession at the Expo 2020 site, which Dubai will hand over after the event's conclusion in 2022 for construction of the Church's first temple in the Middle East region.

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 2022. There are no Buddhist temples; some Buddhist groups met in private facilities.

There are no synagogues for the expatriate resident Jewish population, but regular communal worship took place on the Sabbath and holidays in private Dubai villas and hotels. Construction in Abu Dhabi of the first official synagogue in the country is scheduled to begin in 2021 as part of the larger government-funded Abrahamic Family House – a project slated to bring together a mosque, church, and synagogue to represent the three Abrahamic faiths. In October, international press reported members of Dubai's Jewish community built a *sukkah* (a small shelter used during celebration of Sukkot, the Jewish harvest festival) outside a hotel at Dubai's iconic Burj Khalifa skyscraper. In December, Dubai's Jewish community held several public Hanukkah celebrations, which included one congregation lighting a large Menorah in front of the Burj Khalifa.

Construction of a new Anglican church in Abu Dhabi remained stalled at 50 percent completion due financial issues; 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.

In January and February, the government hosted members of the Higher Committee of Human Fraternity, a nine-member multifaith committee that included representatives from the UAE, Egypt, Italy, the United States, Bulgaria, and Spain and was tasked with implementing the *Document on Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together* – a declaration of reconciliation, cooperation, tolerance, and fraternity among believers and nonbelievers that was announced during the Pope’s 2019 visit to Abu Dhabi. During the meetings, the participants discussed their commitment to the goal of fostering coexistence, peace, and social fraternity.

In February, the government hosted the Voices of Human Fraternity Forum, which brought together 150 students, youth leaders, advocates, and educational representatives from around the world to promote the values reflected in the *Document on Human Fraternity*.

Following the announcement of normalization of relations with Israel, the Abu Dhabi Department of Culture and Tourism sent a letter to all hotels advising them to add kosher menus to their food services. The letter said that kitchens must be prepared for the requirements of Jewish dietary laws and that there would be ongoing kashrut supervision, similar to that of hotels in Israel. According to the letter, “All hotel establishments are advised to include kosher food options on room service menus and at all food and beverage outlets in their establishments.”

During a joint World Muslim Communities Council and Supreme Council of Imams and Islamic Affairs virtual seminar in August, entitled “The Role of Imams in Reinforcing Community Peace,” the chairman of the General Authority of Islamic Affairs and Endowments, Dr. Mohammed al Kaabi, said, “The right path to confronting extremism is to develop moderate religious awareness and support influential religious leaders.”

In September, the Minister of Culture and Youth said the government wanted to send “a message of hope to the community in Mosul, which has always been an incubator for religious and intellectual discourse.”

In November, the Education Affairs Office of the Crown Prince in Abu Dhabi announced that at least 1,500 teachers would receive moral education training to instill tolerance, community spirit, and compassion in students.

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.

Prominent government figures routinely acknowledged minority religious holidays and promoted messages of tolerance through various print and media platforms. In September, Minister of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation Abdullah bin Zayed al-Nahyan extended New Year’s greetings to the country’s Jewish community on social media on Rosh Hashanah. In October, he visited the Holocaust Memorial in Berlin, where he stated that the visit to the memorial “underscored the importance of human values such as coexistence, tolerance and accepting the other...as well as respect for all creeds and faiths.”

In November, Cleveland Clinic Abu Dhabi opened a multifaith prayer room for use by hospital visitors.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

In January, local press reported that a man identified as a GCC national tried to burn his grandmother alive because he believed she was using black magic to turn him into a woman. The grandmother suffered second and third-degree burns over 25 percent of her body. The Abu Dhabi Court of First Instance sentenced the man to five years in prison and ordered him to pay 50,000 dirhams (\$13,600) to the victim. The man challenged the ruling in the appellate court, which reduced the prison sentence to three years but maintained the compensation amount. The defendant then appealed to Abu Dhabi's Court of Cassation, the emirate’s highest court, where the prosecution argued that the appeal be rejected and that the court

order the defendant to pay the court costs. At year's end, the status of the appeal remained unknown.

In April, the press reported an Indian manager at an Abu Dhabi firm posted graphic anti-Islamic images on Facebook showing how “jihadi” coronavirus could cause exponentially more deaths than explosives. His employer told the press it would investigate the incident. Later that month, an employer fired an Indian worker in Dubai and referred the case to police after the individual ridiculed Muslim worshippers in a Facebook posting about COVID-19. In May, the press reported that three other Indians, in separate incidents, had been disciplined by their employers in Dubai and Sharjah for social media posts deemed offensive to Islam. In one case, the employer referred the matter to police.

According to non-Muslim groups, there continued to be societal pressure discouraging conversion from Islam and encouraging conversion to Islam. Local newspapers published stories portraying conversions to Islam positively. By contrast, observers reported conversion from Islam was highly discouraged through strong cultural and social pressure, particularly from family members. In October, Dubai's Mohammed bin Rashid Center for Islamic Culture reported 2,570 Dubai residents converted to Islam in the first three quarters of 2020.

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 Christmas festivities and Hindu festivals such as Diwali.

Religious literature, primarily related to Islam, was available in stores, although 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 that 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.

According to press reports, Dubai's first kosher restaurant, Kaf, opened in the Burj Khalifa, a local landmark and the world's tallest building, on September 17. On September 18, the Dubai newspaper *Khaleej Times* published a Rosh Hashanah supplement. On December 1, Dubai hosted the country's first Jewish wedding.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

The Ambassador, Charge d'Affaires, visiting U.S. government officials, and embassy and consulate general officers met with representatives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Abu Dhabi's DCD and the Department of Culture and Tourism during the year. U.S. representatives discussed efforts to support religious diversity, inclusiveness, and tolerance; licensing procedures and regulatory practices involving religious groups; and government initiatives to promote moderate interpretations of Islam. Embassy representatives also engaged with government entities on the importance of prohibiting anti-Semitic materials from government-sponsored book fairs.

The U.S. Ambassador at Large for Religious Freedom spoke with the chairman of the UAE Fatwa Council and president of the Forum for Promoting Peace in Muslim Societies, Sheikh Abdullah bin Bayyah, on the subject of furthering religious freedom, protecting religious minorities, and the role of scholars in promoting peace. He also spoke with the head of the Fatwa Council about organizing joint events under the New Alliance of Virtue, an initiative launched by the government in 2019 aimed at fostering religious freedom, cooperation, and tolerance.

The U.S. Special Envoy to Monitor and Combat Anti-Semitism met with officials from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation and Dr. Ali al-Nuaimi of the government-affiliated Hedayah, a center focusing on countering violent extremism, to discuss combatting anti-Semitic rhetoric.

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. As part of its Ramadan outreach activities, in May the embassy hosted a virtual iftar for the healthcare workers of Sheikh Khalifa Medical City. Remarks by U.S. and local officials throughout the year praised mutual efforts to understand different religions and cultures.