

UNITED ARAB EMIRATES 2021 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. 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. 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. The government, having designated the Muslim Brotherhood as a terrorist organization in 2014, in September designated four members of al-Islah, a Muslim Brotherhood affiliate, as terrorists. Despite changes to federal laws removing penalties for adultery or consensual extramarital sex, in August the Supreme Federal Court rejected the appeal of a woman from Sharjah convicted of consensual extramarital sex, finding that local prohibitions were still applicable, even in the absence of any federal penalty. In May, the public prosecutor's office released a video on social media highlighting the penalties for acts of witchcraft and sorcery. In September, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Church of Jesus Christ) began consultations for official recognition from the Dubai Community Development Authority (CDA) in anticipation of building a temple in Dubai on government-granted land at what will be the former site of the Expo 2020 following that event's conclusion in 2022. In February, the Dubai CDA granted an official license to the Jewish congregation "Gates of the East," making it the first and only Jewish congregation with CDA recognition. Dubai authorities eased COVID-19 restrictions gradually during the year. Prayer halls were open to Muslim men throughout the year and authorities reopened prayer halls for Muslim women in June. Authorities permitted all houses of worship to return to 50 percent capacity in August. Limits on capacity, however, remained stricter on places of worship than on businesses and entertainment venues. According to leaders of some communities, restrictions on the number of attendees per religious service put undue burdens on non-Muslim faiths due to the limited number of houses of worship non-Muslim communities were permitted. COVID-19 related restrictions disproportionately impacted unlicensed religious organizations that normally congregated in cinemas and hotels but could no longer do so because of social distancing regulations and closures. Federal regulations designed to reduce COVID-19 transmission continued to

prohibit practices affecting Christian churches, such as receiving communion. In December, the government announced that effective in the new year, the country would adopt a four-and-a-half-day workweek, with Friday afternoon, Saturday, and Sunday serving as the new weekend, after previously following the Islamic workweek, which uses Friday and Saturday as its weekend. 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 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 limiting the spread of what the authorities characterized 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. 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. In September, the Dubai Executive Council issued a resolution authorizing the Islamic Affairs and Charitable Activities Department (IACAD) to license public and private prayer rooms and prohibiting anyone from building, allocating, or modifying a space to be used as a prayer room without prior approval from IACAD. Minority religious groups said 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. During the year, Abu Dhabi began constructing the country's first, purpose-built synagogue as part of the larger government-sponsored Abrahamic Family House, scheduled to open in 2022 and bring together a mosque, church, and synagogue to represent the three Abrahamic faiths on one site. Except in the judiciary and military, non-Muslim minorities did not serve in senior federal positions, while among Muslims, Sunnis predominated in these positions, reflecting the country's religious demographics.

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 houses of worship officially recognized by the federal or local emirate governments, although conversion from Islam was strongly discouraged. Conversion to Islam was encouraged, however. Dubai's Mohammed bin Rashid Center for Islamic Culture reported 3,800 Dubai residents converted to Islam during the year, compared with 3,184 in 2020. 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 minority groups, including registered religious organizations, encountered difficulties obtaining bank loans to cover construction costs for new religious spaces. In February, Jewish communities in the UAE, Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia announced the formation of the region's first communal organization, the Association of Gulf Jewish Communities (AGJC), and incorporated it in Dubai. In June, a memorial exhibition on the Holocaust, which its organizers said was the first of its kind in the Arab world, opened in Dubai. On April 8, Holocaust Remembrance Day (HaShoah), the Washington Institute for Near East Policy hosted a virtual forum about teaching the Holocaust in the Arab world. Ali al-Nuaimi, the chairman of Hedayah, an organization partly funded by the government that is focused on countering violent extremism, participated from its Abu Dhabi location.

The U.S. Charge d'Affaires and embassy and consulate general officers engaged government officials on issues pertaining to religious diversity, inclusiveness, and tolerance, as well as licensing procedures and regulatory practices involving religious and religiously affiliated minority groups. They met with representatives of minority religious organizations and community groups, including the Jewish and Baha'i communities, and different Islamic groups during the year. In these meetings, U.S. officials discussed the promotion of religious tolerance and emphasized the U.S. government's commitment to religious freedom. Embassy and consulate general officials also regularly kept in contact with minority religious groups to monitor their abilities to freely associate and worship. Remarks by U.S. officials throughout the year encouraged efforts to build mutual understanding among different religions and cultures.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 9.9 million (midyear 2021). 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 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, and 2 percent Buddhist, with the remainder belonging to other faith traditions. According to Boston University's 2020 World Religions Database, the population includes approximately 125,000 atheists or agnostics, 72,000 Sikhs, and 49,000 Baha'is.

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, a fine of no less than 50,000 dirhams (\$13,600), and deportation in the case of noncitizens. Individuals seeking the aid of sorcerers also face jail sentences and/or fines.

The law defines blasphemy as any act insulting God, religions, prophets, messengers, holy books, or houses of worship. 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, 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 criminalizes any form of expression the government interprets as blasphemous or offensive toward “divine recognized religions,” inciting religious hatred, or insulting religious convictions. Offenders are subject to imprisonment for five or more years and fines from 250,000 dirhams to two million dirhams (\$68,100-\$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 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, collecting donations, 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 10,000 dirhams (\$2,700). Most local authorities across the country grant exemptions allowing non-Muslims to eat during the day in malls, hotels, and some stand-alone restaurants. In April, the governments of the Dubai and Abu Dhabi emirates issued guidelines lifting a requirement to install curtains or otherwise cover the front of restaurants as a precondition of serving food during Ramadan fasting hours. The law prohibits Muslims from knowingly eating pork throughout the year. Consumption of alcohol by non-Muslims is not criminalized at the federal level. The government announced a series of legal reforms in 2020 decriminalizing the consumption of alcohol by Muslims at the federal level, while allowing each emirate to regulate “the use, circulation, and possession or trade of

alcoholic beverages,” which may include a ban for Muslims at the local level. The government of the Sharjah emirate bans all consumption of alcohol.

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 – 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. Each emirate’s government is responsible for administrative oversight of schools.

Land ownership by noncitizens is restricted to designated freehold areas. 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 antidiscrimination law prohibits multiple forms of discrimination, including religious discrimination, and criminalizes acts or expressions the government interprets as provoking religious hatred or insulting religion; this provides a legal basis for restricting events, such as conferences and seminars. The law also criminalizes broadcasting, publication, and transmission of such material by any means, including audiovisual 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, divorce, and inheritance. Shia Muslims in Dubai may pursue Shia family law cases through a special Shia council rather than through the regular judicial system. In the case of noncitizens, or noncitizens married to citizens, the parties may petition the court to have the laws of their home country apply rather than sharia in cases involving divorce and inheritance. The federal law applies if either spouse is Emirati. On November 7, the emirate of Abu Dhabi issued a decree allowing non-Muslims to apply civil law in matters of marriage, divorce, inheritance, alimony, proof of paternity, and custody.

Sharia also applies in some criminal matters. Civil law provides the basis for decisions on all other matters. 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. Amendments to the federal law in November 2020 repealed an article giving reduced (lenient) sentences in what are called “honor crimes,” and the law now treats “honor killings” as normal murder cases.

Federal legal reforms in 2020 also removed flogging from the federal penal code, limited the jurisdiction of sharia courts to deal with blood money cases, and removed penalties for adultery, cohabitation outside marriage, and consensual extramarital sex. Local sharia laws and punishments regarding adultery and consensual extramarital sex, however, remain applicable.

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.

Strict interpretation of sharia – which often favors the father – does not apply to child custody cases, and courts have applied the “best interests of the child” standard for several years. 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.

In custody cases involving noncitizens, UAE courts may apply the laws of the country of nationality of each child involved. In December, a new personal status law for most expatriates went into effect in the emirate of Abu Dhabi that allows for joint custody agreements, civil marriages, birth certificates for children of unmarried parents, the equality of men and women as witnesses, and new alimony and inheritance laws. The new law also allows for non-Muslim judges, creates a new court to hear these cases, and requires cases to be heard in both Arabic and English. This new personal status law does not apply to Muslim citizens of countries that base their law on sharia, including the UAE.

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.

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 (DCD) as officially recognized to perform these acts.

Noncitizens may register wills in the emirate in which they live. Since 2020, personal status laws permit 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. Non-Muslims may register their wills with the Abu Dhabi judicial system 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 membership in groups the government designates as terrorist organizations or that promote damage to national unity or harm public order, with penalties up to life imprisonment and capital punishment. Promoting these activities using any means, written or otherwise, is punishable with not less than 15 and no more than 25 years of prison. 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 up to life imprisonment and fines from 500,000 dirhams to one million dirhams (\$136,000-\$272,000). Electronic violations of the law are subject to a maximum fine of four million dirhams (\$1.09 million). Abuse of religion to promote sedition and strife or to harm national unity and social peace is punishable with not less than 10 years imprisonment and a fine of not more than 500,000 dirhams (\$136,000).

The law does not allow for political parties or similar associations. The law does not protect the right of individuals to organize politically and specifically bans a number of organizations with political wings, including the Muslim Brotherhood, as regional and local terrorist groups.

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, an independent federal legal authority that reports directly to the cabinet. The Awqaf director general holds the title of Deputy Minister, and he and the Awqaf board of directors are appointed by the cabinet. The Awqaf is responsible for managing domestic Islamic endowments, imam tutelage, education centers, publications, and general messaging.

Under the law, emirate and federal authorities concerned with mosque affairs are responsible for naming mosques, providing and supervising the needs of mosques and prayer spaces, including religious centers used by Shia Muslims, 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 and 500,000 dirhams (\$54,500-\$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 and 500,000 dirhams (\$68,100-\$136,000).

In Abu Dhabi, the Awqaf is entrusted with overseeing Islamic religious affairs across mosques, sermons, imam tutelage, and publications. Non-Islamic 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 Abu Dhabi DCD uses a three-tier system of authorization for regulating non-Islamic houses of worship. Under the system, instituted in 2020, 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.

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 to 100,000 dirhams (\$140-\$27,200). Repeated violations may result in the doubling of fines, not to exceed 200,000 dirhams (\$54,500).

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

Government Practices

During the year there were reports of persons held incommunicado and without charge because of their political views or affiliations, which often involved alleged links to Islamist organizations. The government continued to make arrests or impose other restrictions for speech related to and in support of Islamist political activities.

Ahmed Mansoor, a human rights activist arrested in 2017, remained imprisoned at year's end, following a 2018 court ruling upholding an earlier conviction under the cybercrime law of insulting the "status and prestige of the UAE and its symbols." As of year's end, the government had yet to announce the specific charges against Mansoor but said that he promoted "a sectarian and hate-filled agenda," as well as other accusations. In July, the NGO Human Rights Watch (HRW) stated that authorities held Mansoor in solitary confinement and removed his clothes, mattress, blanket, and toiletries from his cell. Authorities reportedly denied him access to lawyers, granted only a limited number of family visits, and subjected him to death threats, physical assault, government surveillance, and inhumane treatment while in custody.

The government, having designated the Muslim Brotherhood as a terrorist organization in 2014, continued to restrict the activities of organizations and individuals allegedly associated with al-Islah, a Muslim Brotherhood affiliate. According to HRW, in September, the government designated four members of al-Islah, all living in self-imposed exile, as terrorists: Hamad al-Shamsi, Mohammed Saqr al-Zaabi, Ahmed al-Shaiba al-Nuaimi, and Saeed al-Tenaiji. The designation included asset freezes, property confiscations, and criminalizing communications with their families. The four men told HRW that authorities threatened their families with prosecution for "communicating with terrorists." The men learned of their designations only after the Cabinet of Ministers issued the decision.

Despite changes to federal laws removing penalties for adultery or consensual extramarital sex, local sharia laws and punishments remained applicable. A member of the Sharjah Consultative Council reported that in August, the Supreme Federal Court rejected the appeal of a woman from the Emirate of Sharjah convicted of having consensual extramarital sex, finding that local emirate laws were still applicable, even in the absence of any federal penalty.

Police and courts continued to enforce laws prohibiting sorcery. In May, local press reported Dubai customs authorities prevented five attempts in 2020 to smuggle material local authorities believed were related to witchcraft and sorcery, including books, knives, talismans, amulets, containers of blood, and animal skins

and bones, compared with 22 attempts in 2019. In May, the federal prosecutor's office released a video on social media highlighting the penalties for acts of witchcraft and sorcery. In addition, customs authorities occasionally denied or delayed entry to passengers carrying items deemed intended for sorcery, black magic, or witchcraft. In July, local media quoted a Dubai police official as saying that 80 percent of individuals seeking the aid of sorcerers were women, and that they likely "turned to sorcery" because they believed they had been bewitched.

Representatives of non-Islamic faiths again 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 many groups having ambiguous legal status and created difficulties for them in carrying out certain administrative functions, including banking and signing leases. Religious groups said the bureaucracy was slow to conduct security checks and issue necessary visas. 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 Awqaf continued to vet and appoint men to be Sunni imams (except in Dubai), based on their educational background and knowledge of Islam, along with security checks. According to the Awqaf, the government continued to fund Sunni mosques, except for those considered private, and retained all Sunni imams as government employees.

Dubai's IACAD controlled the appointment of Sunni clergy and their conduct during worship in Dubai mosques. All imams in Dubai's more than 2,100 Sunni mosques were government employees and included both citizens and noncitizens. Dubai's IACAD maintained more stringent qualification requirements for expatriate imams than for local imams, such as requiring them to demonstrate memorization of larger parts of the Quran, and starting salaries were much lower, a practice permitted under federal law. Expatriate imams also could not obtain other employment without permission from the authorities. Local communities said these additional requirements did not hinder their ability to find qualified imams.

The Jaafari Affairs Council, located in Dubai and appointed by the Dubai ruler, continued to manage Shia affairs for the entire country, including overseeing mosques and community activities, managing financial affairs, and hiring imams.

The council complied with weekly guidance from IACAD and issued additional instructions on sermons to Shia mosques. Shia adherents worshiped in and maintained their own mosques. The government considered all Shia mosques to be private; however, they were technically eligible to receive some funds from the government upon request. Shia sources said they doubted the government would provide funding in practice, and therefore did not seek it.

Ismaili Muslims continued to appoint their own community leaders.

One source said it was difficult for his church to access funds or receive an extension of its operating license under Abu Dhabi DCD's new three-tier system of authorization for regulating non-Islamic houses of worship. The source attributed these difficulties to it being a new system rather than a deliberate attempt by the government to discriminate against his church.

In September, the Church of Jesus Christ began consultations for official recognition from the Dubai CDA in anticipation of building a temple in the emirate on government-granted land at what will be the former site of Expo 2020 following that event's conclusion in 2022. Consultations remained ongoing and the Church of Jesus Christ had not yet submitted a formal application at year's end. Church officials toured the site in October. The Church continued to maintain a chapel in Abu Dhabi.

In February, the Dubai CDA granted an official license to the Jewish congregation "Gates of the East," making it the first and only Jewish congregation with CDA recognition. Official recognition allowed the group to secure religious worker visas. According to local sources, at year's end, discussions between the congregation and the government on plans to build a physical synagogue in Dubai were ongoing, and the congregation continued to rent hotel rooms for worship.

Community leaders stated the tacit Abu Dhabi guidelines requiring non-Muslim religious leaders to work in the ministry full-time and be sufficiently credentialed in order to obtain a clergy visa continued to create difficulties for religious leaders who served their congregations on a volunteer or part-time basis or who did 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 stated the system discriminated against smaller and less recognized denominations and forced them to either end operations or join with other denominations.

Within prisons, authorities continued to require Muslims to attend weekly Islamic services, and non-Muslims reported some pressure to attend ostensibly nonmandatory lectures and classes about Islam. Some Christian clergy stated incarcerated Christians did not have worship spaces. They said that when authorities granted them prison access, authorities permitted them to take Bibles to the prisoners. In several emirates, authorities did not allow Christian clergy to visit Christian prisoners.

The government continued to permit 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.

The government continued to maintain COVID-19-related restrictions on gatherings for religious purposes throughout the year. From January to June, religious venues operated at 30 percent capacity. In Dubai, only men were allowed to attend mosques during this time. In June, Dubai authorities permitted women's prayer halls for Muslims to reopen, also at 30 percent capacity. In August, authorities permitted houses of worship to return to 50 percent capacity. During the same period, the Dubai government allowed entertainment and sporting events and social activities to operate at 60 percent capacity, entertainment venues (e.g., museums and cinemas) and restaurants to operate at 80 percent capacity, and business events and hotels to operate at 100 percent capacity. In September, the government increased the allowed capacity at houses of worship throughout the country, and further increased it in November. At year's end, capacity in worship spaces was limited by the congregants' ability to maintain mandatory social distancing.

According to representatives of various religious groups, restrictions on the number of attendees per religious service put undue burdens on non-Islamic faiths due to the limited number of houses of worship non-Muslim communities were permitted. According to religious community leaders, Dubai authorities conducted regular inspections to ensure adherence to COVID-19-related restrictions. Religious community leaders stated Dubai authorities required them to report the number of COVID-19-positive cases in their congregations. Federal regulations designed to reduce COVID-19 transmission continued to prohibit practices affecting Christian churches, such as receiving communion. Christian sources said they understood the need for such precautions. In November, authorities in Abu Dhabi permitted women to attend Friday prayers again at the Grand Mosque.

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

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 and provided they observed the prohibition on proselytizing. 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 November, leaders of the Hindu community attended a ceremony marking the placement of carved stones as part of the ongoing construction of Abu Dhabi's Hindu temple, expected to be completed in 2023. The ceremony included a religious blessing of the site. The *Jerusalem Post* reported that on November 28, UAE resident Rabbi Levi Duchman lit a Hanukkah menorah and recited holiday blessings at the Israel pavilion at Dubai Expo 2020 (which opened in 2021, following a year's delay). Members of Dubai's Jewish community held multiple public and private celebrations throughout the holiday.

Christian community leaders stated the Roads and Transport Authority (RTA) in Dubai fined both drivers and passengers of buses transporting worshipers to churches for lacking proper RTA permits. Religious leaders said the rules and regulations were confusing, particularly the requirement to obtain permits from a government authority other than the CDA.

The Dubai Quran Award program continued to allow prisoners who memorized the Quran to have their sentences reduced or be granted amnesty.

In December, the government announced that, effective in the new year, the country would adopt a four-and-a-half-day workweek, with Friday afternoon, Saturday, and Sunday serving as the new weekend. The country previously followed the Islamic workweek, which uses Friday and Saturday as its weekend. As part of the change, the government said that Friday midday sermons and prayers would be held at 1:15 p.m., slightly later than the previous schedule.

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 some 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. International media sites, accessed

using the country's internet providers, contained content filtered by government censors.

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.

Observers familiar with the media environment stated government officials warned journalists against publishing or broadcasting material deemed politically or culturally sensitive. Editors and journalists commonly practiced self-censorship due to fear of government retribution, particularly since most journalists were foreign nationals and could be deported. Authorities did not allow the importation or publication of some books they viewed as critical of the government, Islam, and local culture, as well as books that supported the Muslim Brotherhood or its ideology.

The Awqaf continued to oversee the administration of Sunni mosques, except in Dubai, where they were administered by the IACAD. On its website, the Awqaf stated its goals included offering "religious guidance in the UAE to instill the principle of moderation in Islam." The Awqaf stated 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. The Awqaf regularly held training workshops to instruct imams on sermon delivery and how to communicate values of moderation and tolerance.

The Awqaf applied a three-tier system in which junior Sunni 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. Sermons sometimes dealt with contemporary topics; for example, in December, after President Khalifa bin Zayed al-Nahyan appointed the board of directors of the country's newly established National Human Rights Institution, sermons praised the country for its human rights record. Other sermon topics reportedly included the power of contemplation, and prayer and piety as keys to inner peace. 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.

The Jaafari Affairs 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 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 Awqaf also operated an online "e-fatwa" service.

Authorities did not allow the importation or publication of some books they viewed as critical of the government, Islam, and local culture, as well as books that supported the Muslim Brotherhood or its ideology.

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.

Bookstores in the country carried pro-atheism, anti-organized religion titles by well-known authors in English and Arabic. These stores also sold books on non-Islamic religions.

Customs authorities continued to review the content of imported religious materials and occasionally confiscated some of them.

In September, the Dubai Executive Council issued a resolution authorizing IACAD to license public and private Islamic prayer rooms, and prohibiting anyone from building, allocating, or modifying a space to be used as a prayer room without prior approval from IACAD.

The Jaafari Council continued to regulate Shia worship spaces.

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 continued to gather in other spaces, such as hotels, subject to COVID-19 capacity restrictions. There was one Sikh temple in Dubai, built on land provided by the government within a religious complex shared with Christian churches, the same complex in which the new Hindu temple construction, expected to be completed in 2023, was underway.

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

There continued to be no synagogues for the expatriate resident Jewish population, but regular communal worship took place in hotels on the Sabbath and holidays.

During the year, Abu Dhabi began constructing the country's first purpose-built synagogue as part of the larger government-sponsored Abrahamic Family House project, scheduled to open in 2022 and bring together a mosque, church, and synagogue to represent the three Abrahamic faiths on one site. According to the *Times of Israel* website, in June, the government announced that the synagogue at the site would be named the Moses Ben Maimon Synagogue, after the 12th-century philosopher and rabbinical scholar Maimonides. The mosque would be named Imam al-Tayeb Mosque, and the church St. Francis Church.

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.

Members of unregistered religious organizations stated that their organizations continued to face challenges in renting spaces at hotels in some circumstances. In Abu Dhabi, the DCD continued to require religious functions at hotels be pre-approved and overseen by registered clergy. The government permitted groups that chose not to register to carry out religious functions in private homes as long as these activities did not disturb neighbors through excessive noise or vehicle congestion. COVID-19-related restrictions, however, continued to disproportionately impact 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, although restrictions on public gatherings eased as the year progressed.

In Dubai, non-Muslim community members reported continued delays in obtaining permits from the CDA to worship in spaces outside of government-designated religious compounds. Community representatives also reported restrictions on 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.

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 generally sufficient to meet demand, although press reporting indicated some

strains on capacity during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic. 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. Hindu temples also provided cremation services to non-Hindus.

Except in the judiciary and military, non-Muslim religious minorities did not serve in senior federal positions, while among Muslims, Sunnis predominated in these positions, reflecting the country's religious demographics.

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-related concerns.

Immigration authorities continued to ask foreigners applying for residence permits to declare their religious affiliation on applications, although immigration officers said foreigners, including atheists and agnostics, had the option to leave the field blank. School applications also continued to ask for family religious affiliation in order to distinguish between Muslim students, who were required to take Islamic studies, and non-Muslim students, who were exempt. According to Ministry of Interior officials, the government collected this information for demographic statistical analysis.

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

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 November, Vice President of the UAE and Ruler of Dubai Mohammed bin Rashid al-Maktoum and Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi Mohammed bin Zayed al-Nahyan publicly commemorated the Hindu festival of Diwali.

Media reported that in September, Minister of Tolerance and Coexistence Sheikh Nahyan bin Mubarak al-Nahyan spoke at the government-sponsored Eshraqat (“Radiance”) Festival in Abu Dhabi to students about “the role of education in preparing future generations with ethics and virtues who will renounce extremism and hate and promote the values of tolerance and coexistence.”

On November 16, the Minister of Tolerance posted to Twitter a “call for upholding the values of coexistence, tolerance, and humanity, and rejecting violence, fanaticism, and extremism for a better future for all mankind.”

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

According to non-Muslim groups, there continued to be strong cultural and societal pressure discouraging conversion from Islam and encouraging conversion to Islam, particularly from family members. Local newspapers published stories portraying conversions to Islam positively. Dubai’s Mohammed bin Rashid Center for Islamic Culture reported 3,800 Dubai residents converted to Islam during the year, compared with 3,184 in 2020. Ajman police reported in October that six inmates converted to Islam in the previous three months, for a total of 47 inmates in five years.

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 houses of worship officially recognized by the federal or local governments.

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. 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.

Private and government-run 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 minority groups, including registered religious organizations, encountered difficulties obtaining bank loans to cover construction costs for new religious spaces.

There continued to be two Hindu temples, both predating the country's independence, in Dubai. There were no Buddhist temples; some Buddhist groups met in private facilities.

Construction of a new Anglican church in al-Mushrif, Abu Dhabi, remained stalled at 50 percent completion due to financial issues; the projected completion date was not clear at year's end.

Following the opening of the first kosher restaurant in 2020, kosher food services continued to expand in Dubai. In March, a second kosher restaurant opened in Dubai's Burj Khalifa skyscraper, and a local company, led by a member of the country's resident Jewish community, partnered with the established kosher kitchen to cater airline meals for Emirates and other airlines.

In February, Jewish communities in the UAE, Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia announced the formation of the region's first communal organization, the AGJC, incorporated in Dubai. Rabbi Elie Abadie, the senior rabbi for the Jewish Council of the Emirates, led the group, along with its president, Ebrahim Dawood Nonoo, a citizen of Bahrain. According to press reports, the AGJC was creating a Jewish court to preside over issues of civil disputes, personal status, inheritance, and Jewish ritual. It planned also to run the Arabian Kosher Certification Agency throughout the six countries. On June 4, the AGJC hosted an in-person Shabbat dinner for diplomats and Emiratis in Dubai. Rabbi Abadie, President Nonoo, and Alex Peterfreund of the UAE spoke about Jewish life in the Gulf and answered questions from Emirati participants about opportunities for Muslim and Jewish cooperation.

In June, a memorial exhibition on the Holocaust, which its organizers said was the first of its kind in the Arab world, opened in Dubai. The "We Remember" exhibition at the Crossroads of Civilizations Museum included first-hand testimonies of Holocaust survivors. The museum hosted visits from local school groups beginning in November.

Expo 2020 Dubai featured a thematic week on “Tolerance and Inclusivity” from November 14 to 20. The week highlighted the country’s efforts to support religious tolerance and included the launch of a “Global Tolerance Alliance,” announced by Minister al-Nahyan, and a “Global Interfaith Summit” that brought together various government representatives with local and regional religious leaders to discuss religious coexistence.

On April 8, Holocaust Remembrance Day (HaShoah), the Washington Institute for Near East Policy hosted a virtual forum about teaching the Holocaust in the Arab world. Ali al-Nuaimi, the chairman of Hedayah, an organization partly funded by the government and focused on countering violent extremism, participated from its Abu Dhabi location. In his remarks, al-Nuaimi said, “The older generation operated in an environment where speaking about the Holocaust was tantamount to betraying Arabs and Palestinians. Public figures failed to speak the truth, because a political agenda hijacked their narrative.”

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

The Charge d’Affaires and embassy and consulate general officers engaged government officials throughout the year on efforts to support religious diversity, inclusiveness, and tolerance, and discussed licensing procedures and regulatory practices involving religious and religiously affiliated groups.

The Charge d’Affaires and embassy and consulate general officers regularly met with representatives of religious organizations and other groups associated with minority religious communities, including Jewish community and diaspora representatives and the Baha’i community, to learn more about issues affecting them as part of continuing efforts to monitor their abilities to freely associate and worship; they discussed the ongoing efforts by different UAE-based groups to accomplish these objectives. The Charge and embassy and consulate general officers also met with Islamic organizations. In these meetings, U.S. officials discussed the promotion of religious tolerance and emphasized the U.S. government’s commitment to religious freedom.

As part of its Ramadan outreach activities, the embassy hosted iftars in April and May with government, media, religious, business, and cultural figures. Remarks by U.S. officials throughout the year encouraged efforts to build mutual understanding among different religions and cultures. Embassy and consulate general officers also participated in minority religious celebrations, such as Jewish

Shabbat services, and consulate representatives attended a Hannukah event on November 29 at the Crossroads of Civilizations Museum.

The USA Pavilion at Expo 2020 featured Thomas Jefferson’s Quran, on loan from the Library of Congress for its first overseas exhibition, to illustrate the long history of religious freedom in the United States. The USA Pavilion also cohosted with the Israel Pavilion a screening of the documentary “Amen-Amen-Amen: A Story of Our Times,” which highlighted the story of the Jewish community in the UAE and its presentation of a sacred Torah scroll to Abu Dhabi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Zayed al-Nahyan in 2019.