United Arab Emirates

Stable / Unchanged ▬

Religion

- Muslims : **76.7%**
- Christians : **12.4%**
- Hindus : **6.5%**
- Buddhists : **1.9%**
- Agnostics : **1.1%**
- Others : **1.4%**

Population	Area
9,267,000	83,600 Km^2

Legal framework on freedom of religion and actual application

The United Arab Emirates (UAE) is a federation of seven emirates situated in the Persian Gulf. Dubai is politically and economically the most important of them.

According to the constitution of 1971,[1] Islam is the official religion in the federation. Article 7 reads: "Islam is the official religion of the UAE. The Islamic *Shari'a* is a main source of legislation in the UAE." Article 25 excludes discrimination based on religion. It reads: "All persons are equal in law. There shall be no distinction among the citizens of the UAE on the basis of race, nationality, faith or social status." Article 32 reads: "Freedom to exercise religious worship is guaranteed in accordance with the generally accepted traditions provided that such freedom is consistent with the public policy or does not violate the public morals."

Muslim citizens do not have the right to change religion. Apostasy in Islam is punishable by death. Apostasy is criminalised in accordance with *hudud* offences, which are based on Islamic law and incorporated in the country's Penal Code. These include "adultery, apostasy, murder, theft, highway robbery that involves killing, and a false accusation of committing adultery".[2] Article 1 of the penal code provides that Islamic law applies in *hudud* cases, including the payment of blood money and murder. Article 66 states that the "original punishments" under the law include punishments of *hudud* crimes, including the death penalty. No one, however, has been prosecuted or punished by a court for such an offence.

The law criminalises blasphemy and imposes fines and imprisonment as punishment. Insulting other religions is also banned. Non-citizens face deportation in case of blasphemy.

While Muslims may proselytise, penalties are in place for non-Muslims proselytising among Muslims. If caught, non-

citizens may have their residency revoked and face deportation.

Shari'a law is applied in matters of personal status for Muslim citizens and residents. Muslim men may marry non-Muslim women 'of the book', i.e. Christians or Jews. Muslim women can only marry Muslim men. In the case of a mixed marriage between a Muslim man and a non-Muslim woman, child custody is granted to the father. Non-Muslim wives are not eligible for naturalisation.

Muslims and non-Muslims are required by law to respect fasting hours during Ramadan.

The government controls content in almost every Sunni mosques. Textbooks and curricula in both private and public schools are censored by the Ministry of Education.[3]

Christian churches may not be adorned by bell towers or have crosses on them.

In July 2015, the UAE announced new legislation for crimes related to religious hatred and extremism. These included the death penalty. A presidential decree bans any act that stirs up religious hatred as well as discrimination "on the basis of religion, caste, creed, doctrine, race, colour or ethnic origin".[4] According to the decree carried by an official news agency, offenders risk up to 10 years in prison or the death penalty if convicted of "takfirism" (declaring other Muslims infidels) or Sunni Muslim extremism.

Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid, Vice President and Ruler of Dubai, said the law "guarantees the freedom of individuals from religious intolerance … and underpins the UAE's policy of inclusiveness".[5]Jesuit priest Father Samir Khalil commented: "By doing this, the UAE has taken a step forward with regard to religious freedom, still the exception to the rule in Muslim countries."[6]

Non-citizen residents come mainly as guest workers from South and South East Asia, but also from the Middle East, Europe and North America. Although recent numbers are not available, the majority of residents are Muslims. According to the last census (2005), more than three-quarters of the population are Muslims, with Christians the next largest group.
[7]

The Catholic Church is present through the Apostolic Vicariate of Southern Arabia (AVOSA) with its seat in Abu Dhabi, currently occupied by Bishop Paul Hinder. Eight Catholic parishes and nine schools operate in the UAE. The number of Catholics is estimated to be around 800,000.[8]

There are also Protestant and Orthodox communities. In total, more than 35 churches operate as well as two Hindu temples. Given the large numbers of worshippers, they are often overcrowded.

Incidents

According to the *International Religious Freedom Report for 2016*[9], the UAE government continues to pro-vide land for Christian churches (as well as Sikh and Hindu temples). It also provides land for non-Islamic cemeteries and cremation facilities for the country's large Hin-du community.

In November 2016, UAE authorities held a conference[10] to discuss ways to promote tolerance and understanding. Religious representatives were among the invited guests, among them Justin Welby, Archbishop of Canterbury, the most senior cleric in the Church of England, and Dr Ahmed El Tayeb, Grand Imam of Al Azhar and president of the UAE's Muslim Council of Elders. It was decided that a union would be formed for youth from various cultures and nationalities and aimed at improving and encouraging tolerance.

In June 2017, Abu Dhabi's Crown Prince and Deputy Supreme Commander of the UAE armed forces, Sheikh Mohammad bin Zayed Al-Nahyan, ordered that the Sheikh Mohammad bin Zayed Mosque be renamed "Mary, Mother of Jesus". This decision was taken in order to "consolidate bonds of humanity between followers of different religions"[11] The move to rename the mosque reflects UAE initiatives to promote religious tolerance in the region.

In December 2017, UAE Prime Minister and Dubai Emir Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid al-Maktoum declared that the pedestrian bridge over the recently built Dubai Canal be named "Tolerance Bridge".[12] He had previously tweeted that "Love and tolerance are bridges of communication and a universal language, binding humanity across different languages, religions and cultures". He added that "these are the founda-tions of the Emirates".

From 11th – 13th December 2017 the Forum for Promoting Peace in Muslim Societies was organised in Abu Dhabi. Hosted by the Emirati Minister of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation Sheikh Abdullah bin Zayed Al Nahyan, the theme of this fourth round of the Forum was "Global Peace and the Fear of Islam: Countering the Spread of Extremism". [13] A joint cooperation agreement between the United Nations and the Forum was announced by Undersecretary-General and United Nations Special Adviser on the Prevention of Genocide, Adama Dieng. This cooperation consists in organising 10 research workshops to promote religious education in the Islamic world[14]

Prospects for freedom of religion

One can expect freedom of religion to improve in the coming years in the UAE. Local Church leaders describe the atmosphere as friendly and praise the open atmosphere in the country.[15] George,[16] a Maronite Christian born to Lebanese parents, told ACN: "The UAE is a good place for Christians to live in. There are limits, of course, but respecting them [means] one has a good life there." The new law against religious hatred is a hopeful sign.

Endnotes / Sources

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[14] 'As Part of the Fourth Annual Forum for Promoting Peace in Muslim Societies', Business Wire, 14th December 2018 https://www.businesswire.com/news/home/20171213006267/en/Part-Fourth-Annual-Forum-Promoting-Peace-Muslim, (accessed 27th February 2018).

[15] S. Zaatari, 'Churches praise UAE's religious freedom and tolerance', Gulf News, 1st December 2014, http://gulfnews.com/news/uae/society/churches-praise-uae-s-religious-freedom-and-tolerance-1.1420738, (accessed 16th March 2018).

[16] Full name not given for security reasons.