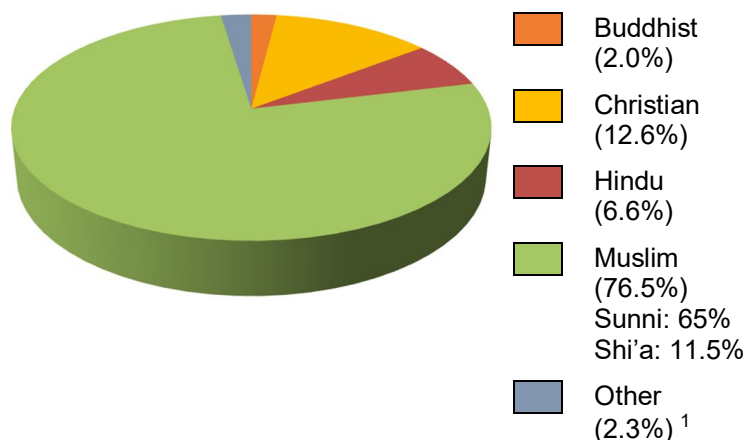


UNITED ARAB EMIRATES



Area:	Population ² :	Political system:	Major Language(s):
77,700 km ²	8.1 million	Monarchy	Arabic

Legal framework on freedom of religion and actual application

Around 89 per cent of the UAE's inhabitants are not citizens. An estimated 85 per cent of Muslims are Sunni Muslims. Up to 15 percent are Shi'a Muslims.³

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 a 2005 census, 76 per cent are Muslims, around nine per cent are Christians and around 15 percent are Hindu, Buddhists or of other faiths.⁴

The Catholic Church is present through the Apostolic Vicariate of Southern Arabia 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.

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 worshipers, they are often overcrowded.

The United Arab Emirates is a federation of seven emirates situated on the Persian Gulf.

Dubai is the politically and economically most important of them.

According to the 1971 constitution, Islam is the official religion in the federation.⁵ Article 7 reads: "Islam shall be the official religion of the Union. The Islamic *Shari'a* shall be a principal source or legislation in the Union." Article 25 excludes discrimination based on religion. It reads: "All persons shall be equal before the law. No discrimination shall be practised between citizens of the Union by reason of race, nationality, religious belief or social position."

Article 32 reads: "The freedom to hold religious ceremonies in accordance with established custom shall be safeguarded, provided such ceremonies are consistent with public order and with public morals."

Muslim citizens do not hold the right to change religion. Apostasy from Islam is punishable by death. Apostasy is criminalised through the incorporation of the concept of *hudud* crimes under Islamic *Shari'a* into its Penal Code. Those crimes include adultery, apostasy, murder, theft, highway robbery that involves killing, and a false accusation of committing adultery. Article 1 of the Penal Code provides that Islamic law applies to *hudud* crimes, the acceptance of blood money and homicide. In addition, Article 66 states that among the "original punishments" under the law are

the punishments of *hudud* crimes, including the imposition of the death penalty. However, “there have been no known prosecutions or legal punishments for apostasy in court.”⁶

The law criminalizes blasphemy and punishes it through fines and imprisonment. Insulting any religion is also forbidden by law. Non-citizens face deportation in case of blasphemy.

While Muslims may proselytize, penalties are in place for those caught proselytizing Muslims. Non-citizens may have their residency revoked and face deportation.

Shari’a law is applied in personal status affairs of 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 naturalization.

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

The government controls content in nearly all Sunni mosques.⁷

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

Incidents

In December 2014 the first Armenian Apostolic church was opened in Abu Dhabi on land donated by the Crown Prince.⁸

In July 2015, the United Arab Emirates announced new legislation for crimes related to religious hatred and extremism. These included the death penalty.⁹ A presidential decree criminalizes any act that stirs up religious hatred and also prohibits discrimination “on the basis of religion, caste, creed, doctrine, race, colour or ethnic origin”. Offenders risk up to 10 years in prison or the death penalty if convicted of “takfirism” (declaring other Muslims infidels) or Sunni Muslim extremism, according to the text of the decree distributed by an official news agency. 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”. Jesuit 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.”¹⁰

In 2014, the oil-rich Gulf state brought in strict new legislation and listed 83 groups classified as “terrorist”, including the Muslim Brotherhood. UAE warplanes are taking part in the US-led international coalition waging a campaign of air raids against the Daesh (ISIS) group in Syria and Iraq.¹¹ The UAE is also concerned about efforts by Sunni extremists to stoke sectarian tensions in the Gulf with recent blasts at Shi’a mosques in Saudi Arabia and Kuwait. Militant violence is rare in the UAE, but Daesh has urged Muslims in Gulf countries to target Western expatriates in retaliation for attacks against it.¹²

In February 2016, Bishop Hinder ordained two deacons as priests – the first such ordination to take place in Abu Dhabi.¹³

Prospects for freedom of religion

Local Church leaders describe the atmosphere as friendly and praise the open atmosphere in the country.¹⁴ George¹⁵, 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.

¹ http://thearda.com/internationalData/countries/Country_232_1.asp

² According to the United Nations 9.4 million people live in the UAE. The United States government estimates the number of inhabitants to be 5.65 million only

³ <http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/religiousfreedom/index.htm#wrapper>

⁴ <http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/religiousfreedom/index.htm#wrapper>

⁵ https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/United_Arab_Emirates_2004.pdf

⁶ <http://www.loc.gov/law/help/apostasy/index.php#uae>

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- ⁷ <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2013/united-arab-emirates>
- ⁸ <http://gulfnews.com/news/uae/society/first-armenian-church-opens-in-abu-dhabi-1.1426120>
- ⁹ <http://gulfnews.com/news/uae/government/new-uae-anti-hate-law-in-detail-1.1553188>
- ¹⁰ <http://www.asianews.it/news-en/A-new-anti-discrimination-law-is-a-step-forward-in-terms-of-religious-freedom-34863.html>;
- http://en.radiovaticana.va/news/2015/07/23/uae_passes_law_to_criminalize_religious_discrimination/1160399
- ¹¹ <http://wwwn.org/articles/44742/>
- ¹² http://en.radiovaticana.va/news/2015/07/23/uae_passes_law_to_criminalize_religious_discrimination/1160399
- ¹³ <http://www.asianews.it/news-en/Indian-priest-in-Arabia:-In-Abu-Dhabi-many-non-Catholics-worship-Christ!-36691.html>
- ¹⁴ <http://gulfnews.com/news/uae/society/churches-praise-uae-s-religious-freedom-and-tolerance-1.1420738>
- ¹⁵ Name intentionally not given in full.