

World
Watch
Research

United Arab Emirates: Country Dossier

January 2020



OpenDoors

Serving persecuted **Christians** worldwide

Open Doors International / World Watch Research

January 2020

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Introduction

World Watch List 2020

Rank	Country	Private life	Family life	Community life	National life	Church life	Violence	Total Score WWL 2020	Total Score WWL 2019	Total Score WWL 2018	Total Score WWL 2017	Total Score WWL 2016
1	North Korea	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	11.1	94	94	94	92	92
2	Afghanistan	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	10.0	93	94	93	89	88
3	Somalia	16.5	16.7	16.6	16.6	16.5	9.4	92	91	91	91	87
4	Libya	15.3	15.5	15.8	16.0	16.4	11.3	90	87	86	78	79
5	Pakistan	14.0	13.9	15.0	14.9	13.7	16.7	88	87	86	88	87
6	Eritrea	14.5	14.9	15.9	15.9	15.4	10.9	87	86	86	82	89
7	Sudan	14.2	14.6	14.5	15.7	16.1	10.4	85	87	87	87	84
8	Yemen	16.6	16.4	16.4	16.7	16.7	2.6	85	86	85	85	78
9	Iran	14.1	14.3	14.1	15.8	16.5	10.4	85	85	85	85	83
10	India	12.9	13.0	13.5	15.0	13.5	14.8	83	83	81	73	68
11	Syria	13.5	14.2	13.0	13.9	14.4	12.6	82	82	76	86	87
12	Nigeria	12.2	11.9	13.5	12.8	13.0	16.7	80	80	77	78	78
13	Saudi Arabia	15.1	14.9	14.1	15.5	16.5	2.4	79	77	79	76	76
14	Maldives	15.4	15.6	14.0	15.9	16.6	0.7	78	78	78	76	76
15	Iraq	14.0	14.6	13.9	14.5	13.6	5.6	76	79	86	86	90
16	Egypt	12.1	13.1	10.7	13.2	10.5	16.1	76	76	70	65	64
17	Algeria	13.5	14.3	10.4	12.8	13.2	9.3	73	70	58	58	56
18	Uzbekistan	15.1	12.9	14.1	12.2	15.7	3.0	73	74	73	71	70
19	Myanmar	11.8	11.9	13.5	12.5	12.2	10.7	73	71	65	62	62
20	Laos	12.8	9.9	14.1	14.4	14.9	5.6	72	71	67	64	58
21	Vietnam	12.3	8.5	12.9	13.6	14.5	9.8	72	70	69	71	66
22	Turkmenistan	14.5	11.2	13.8	13.3	15.7	1.9	70	69	68	67	66
23	China	11.6	8.4	11.6	12.8	15.1	10.2	70	65	57	57	57
24	Mauritania	13.9	14.0	13.0	13.7	13.4	0.2	68	67	57	55	50
25	Central African Republic	10.1	9.1	13.1	9.8	10.2	15.6	68	70	61	58	59
26	Morocco	12.4	13.3	10.8	11.7	14.1	4.1	66	63	51	49	47
27	Qatar	13.6	13.4	10.8	12.2	14.1	2.2	66	62	63	66	65
28	Burkina Faso	9.4	9.7	10.2	9.4	11.8	15.6	66	48	-	-	-
29	Mali	9.2	8.2	12.8	10.0	11.7	13.7	66	68	59	59	55
30	Sri Lanka	11.5	9.0	11.0	10.9	9.6	13.1	65	58	57	55	53
31	Tajikistan	13.9	12.3	11.9	12.4	13.1	1.1	65	65	65	58	58
32	Nepal	12.4	10.8	9.9	12.1	12.2	7.0	64	64	64	53	53
33	Jordan	13.1	14.1	10.7	11.7	12.5	1.7	64	65	66	63	59
34	Tunisia	12.0	12.8	10.3	10.8	12.3	5.4	64	63	62	61	58
35	Kazakhstan	13.2	11.5	10.7	12.4	14.0	1.7	64	63	63	56	55
36	Turkey	12.6	11.8	10.7	13.3	11.3	3.7	63	66	62	57	55
37	Brunei	13.8	14.3	10.7	10.3	13.5	0.6	63	63	64	64	61
38	Bangladesh	11.1	9.9	12.7	11.1	8.9	9.3	63	58	58	63	57

39	Ethiopia	10.0	9.2	10.6	10.8	10.4	11.9	63	65	62	64	67
40	Malaysia	12.1	14.6	12.7	12.0	9.6	1.5	62	60	65	60	58
41	Colombia	8.9	7.8	11.9	9.8	8.9	15.0	62	58	56	53	55
42	Oman	12.7	13.1	10.0	11.5	12.7	2.0	62	59	57	53	53
43	Kuwait	13.2	13.1	9.9	11.5	13.4	0.7	62	60	61	57	56
44	Kenya	11.7	10.5	10.9	8.3	10.9	9.1	61	61	62	68	68
45	Bhutan	12.8	10.9	11.8	11.6	13.9	0.0	61	64	62	61	56
46	Russian Federation	12.2	8.3	10.7	10.4	12.1	6.9	60	60	51	46	48
47	United Arab Emirates	12.9	13.0	9.5	11.1	12.6	1.1	60	58	58	55	55
48	Cameroon	8.8	7.2	11.6	7.0	10.4	15.0	60	54	38	-	45
49	Indonesia	10.9	11.1	11.6	10.2	9.5	6.5	60	65	59	55	55
50	Niger	9.4	9.5	13.3	7.2	11.1	9.3	60	52	45	47	53
51	Palestinian Territories	12.2	13.0	9.2	10.2	11.9	3.1	60	57	60	64	62
52	Mexico	8.4	6.8	12.2	10.6	10.0	11.5	60	61	59	57	56
53	Azerbaijan	13.0	10.0	9.3	11.1	12.4	1.5	57	57	57	52	57
54	Comoros	11.7	11.5	9.1	9.9	13.9	0.9	57	56	56	56	56
55	Kyrgyzstan	12.9	10.3	11.1	9.4	11.9	1.1	57	56	54	48	46
56	Djibouti	12.3	12.3	10.3	10.0	11.2	0.2	56	56	56	57	58
57	Democratic Republic of the Congo	5.6	6.7	10.6	7.4	10.4	15.6	56	55	33	-	53
58	Chad	11.5	8.2	10.2	9.6	10.3	5.9	56	48	40	-	51
59	Bahrain	12.1	12.3	9.1	10.1	10.5	0.9	55	55	57	54	54
60	Tanzania	9.3	10.8	10.3	8.6	8.7	7.0	55	52	53	59	57
61	Cuba	9.6	5.6	9.5	11.8	12.0	3.5	52	49	49	47	42
62	Uganda	8.1	4.6	6.7	6.7	9.1	13.0	48	47	46	53	45
63	Burundi	5.1	5.8	9.7	9.2	9.6	8.7	48	43	-	-	-
64	Guinea	10.3	7.5	8.3	7.0	8.1	3.7	45	46	-	-	-
65	South Sudan	5.7	1.5	7.0	6.3	7.8	15.6	44	44	-	-	-
66	Mozambique	6.9	4.6	7.1	5.2	8.0	11.7	43	43	-	-	-
67	Gambia	8.3	8.2	8.7	8.3	8.8	1.1	43	43	-	-	-
68	Angola	6.4	3.6	7.0	8.7	10.4	6.7	43	42	-	-	-
69	Venezuela	3.8	4.4	10.6	9.3	9.5	4.8	42	41	34	-	-
70	Ivory Coast	9.8	8.6	8.2	5.5	6.6	3.5	42	43	-	-	-
71	Rwanda	5.3	4.4	6.7	7.8	10.1	7.2	42	41	-	-	-
72	Nicaragua	5.8	4.2	8.5	9.8	9.0	4.1	41	41	-	-	-
73	Togo	8.6	6.7	8.5	7.1	8.4	1.1	41	42	-	-	-

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Brief note on sources and definitions

This country report is a collation of data and analysis based around Open Doors World Watch List (WWL) and includes statistical information on world religions, Christian denominations and people groups prepared by the World Christian Database (WCD). The highlighted links in the text can be found written out in full at the conclusion of each main section under the heading “External links”. The WWL 2020 reporting period was 1 November 2018 - 31 October 2019.

The definition of persecution used in WWL analysis is: “Any hostility experienced as a result of one’s identification with Christ. This can include hostile attitudes, words and actions towards Christians”.

This broad definition includes (but is not limited to) restrictions, pressure, discrimination, opposition, disinformation, injustice, intimidation, mistreatment, marginalization, oppression, intolerance, infringement, violation, ostracism, hostilities, harassment, abuse, violence, ethnic cleansing and genocide.

The latest update of WWL Methodology including appendices can be found on the [World Watch List Documentation](#) page of the Open Doors Analytical website (password: freedom).

WWL 2020: Persecution summary / United Arab Emirates

Brief country details

Pop 2019	Christians	Chr%
United Arab Emirates		
9,682,000	1,068,000	11.0

Data source: Johnson T M and Zurlo G A, eds., *World Christian Database* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed April 2019).

World Watch List United Arab Emirates	Points	WWL Rank
WWL 2020	60	47
WWL 2019	58	45
WWL 2018	58	40
WWL 2017	55	44
WWL 2016	55	47

Scores and ranks are shown above whenever the country scored 41 points or more in the WWL 2016-2020 reporting periods.

Dominant persecution engines and drivers

United Arab Emirates: Main Persecution engines	Main drivers
Islamic oppression	Citizens (people from the broader society), including mobs, One's own (extended) family, Government officials, Ethnic group leaders, Non-Christian religious leaders
Clan and ethnic antagonism	One's own (extended) family, Ethnic group leaders, Non-Christian religious leaders, Citizens (people from the broader society), including mobs
Dictatorial paranoia	Government officials

Engines and Drivers are listed in order of strength. Only Very strong / Strong / Medium are shown here.

Brief description of persecution situation

Christian expatriates are free to worship in private but the government does not allow them to evangelize or pray in public. Because Emirati society is conservative, Christians exercise self-restraint in public. Local converts from Islam endure the most persecution as they face pressure from family members and the local community to recant their Christian faith. Expatriate Muslims converting to Christianity experience similar pressures as in their home countries, as they are often living within their own national or ethnic communities. Because of the potentially severe consequences, it is almost impossible for converts to reveal their conversion, which is why there are hardly any reports of Christians being killed or harmed for their faith.

Specific examples of persecution in the reporting period

- Converts from Islam to Christianity, both Emirati nationals and foreign workers, continue to face high pressure from their (extended) families, employers and society. If their conversion becomes known, they face losing inheritance and parental rights, being forced to marry, losing their jobs or being placed under pressure to work for 'free'. As a result, many seek asylum in another country.
- Christian migrant workers, especially those working as domestic staff in Emirati homes, remained vulnerable to (sexual) abuse. Although racism plays an even bigger role, their Christian faith is likely to add to their vulnerability.

WWL 2020: Keys to understanding / United Arab Emirates

Link for general background information

BBC country profile: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-14703998>.

Recent history

The United Arab Emirates (UAE) consists of seven emirates which have their own rulers and which were united in a federal state in the early 1970s. The Arab world's only successful attempt at forming a federation is regionally considered a model of success and - according to [BTI Research](#) - served as a model for the establishment of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). Yet there are some clear differences between the seven emirates. Abu Dhabi (the largest emirate) and Dubai are the richest emirates and have more influence – UAE's President Khalifa bin Zayid al-Nahayyan is the ruler of Abu Dhabi. The northern states are poorer, for instance Umm Al Quwain, which is also more Islamically conservative. All emirates have a seat in the 'Federal Supreme Council' – the highest constitutional, executive and legislative authority.

Contrary to fellow Gulf country Bahrain, the wave of Arab Spring uprisings in 2011 hardly seem to have affected the UAE. This is remarkable, especially since Emirati society is based more on tribal loyalty than on democratic norms. However, the population appears to trust the government and its generous distribution of oil wealth obviously plays a significant role. Nevertheless, the authorities did take precautionary measures to maintain stability: Internet restrictions were implemented in 2012 to prevent the use of social media as a means of organizing protests. Also, more than 90 Islamists were arrested at the beginning of 2013, accused of planning a coup. Since then, there have been no potential visible threats to the stability of the country.

In July 2018, the International Court of Justice (ICJ), the principal judicial organ of the United Nations, [ruled](#) that the UAE had violated the rights of Qatari nationals who were banned from the country when the UAE joined the boycott of Qatar.

The UAE has been an ally of Saudi Arabia over the last years. Besides siding with Saudi Arabia in the [Qatar crisis](#), the UAE is also involved in the costly [Yemen war](#); two issues that might change and even destabilize the future of the region. However, [divisions have become visible](#) after the UAE announced its decision to withdraw its troops from Yemen in July 2019.

The UAE is also involved in the ongoing civil war in Libya and is known to be one of the supporters of General Haftar's Libyan National Army. In a UN investigation, the UAE [was suspected](#) of launching a jet fighter missile attack on a migrant detention centre in Libya in July 2019.

Political and legal landscape

The Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU) [classifies](#) the UAE government as 'authoritarian'. Abu Dhabi President Sheikh Khalifa bin Zayed, who has a reputation for being a pro-Western modernizer, was named as president by the UAE Federal Council in November 2004, shortly after the death of his father, Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan al-Nahyan. The UAE is governed by a Supreme Council of Rulers made up of the seven emirs, who appoint the prime minister and the cabinet. However in practise all political decisions rest with the dynastic rulers of the seven emirates.

[Freedom of Thought Report](#) ranks the government and Constitution as having grave violations against human rights and religious freedom and writes: "The Constitution designates Islam as the official religion. Freedom to exercise religious worship is guaranteed, but not non-religious views, and only 'in accordance with the generally-accepted traditions provided that such freedom ... does not violate the public (*Islamic*) morals'."

Middle East Concern ([MEC](#)) describes the legal landscape as follows: "The Constitution of the UAE enshrines Islam as the religion of the State and Islamic law as a principal source of legislation. The constitution also affirms the principle of non-discrimination, including on the basis of religion. ... In 2015 a law was enacted that specifically prohibits 'all forms of discrimination based on religion, caste, creed, doctrine, race, colour or ethnic origin', and in 2016 new Federal Government posts included a Minister of State for Tolerance, with a mandate to promote tolerance as a 'fundamental value' in UAE society. Blasphemy and defamation of religions are prohibited and no non-Islamic proselytism is permitted. Under applicable Islamic law, Muslims are prohibited from changing their religion. In November 2017 the Abu Dhabi Judicial Department gave churches the authority to approve marriages, mediate divorces and, in due course, handle child custody issues, so expatriate Christians in Abu Dhabi will no longer have to use Sharia courts for these purposes. Islamic personal status laws apply for citizens, including a prohibition on Muslim women marrying non-Muslims."

The Fragile States Index ([FSI](#)) political indicators show that the Human Rights situation has been worsening in recent years. This links up with the fact that the Emirati rulers do not allow any dissent. All political decisions rest with the dynastic rulers of the seven emirates and there is no place for the will of the people at large. Freedom of press, assembly, association and expression are severely restricted. There is no space for (or recognition of) political parties, according to Freedom House which rated the country as "not free" in its [2019 report](#). In recent years, [Reporters Without Borders](#) have listed many instances where the freedom of the press and expression were curtailed and critics faced prosecution.

Religious landscape

Like many countries in the Gulf region, society in UAE defines itself as Muslim. The government does not allow any formal or informal education that includes religious teaching other than Islam, except for a very small number of private church-affiliated schools that are allowed to provide religious instruction tailored to the religious background of the pupils. Evangelism is prohibited, but non-Muslim groups can worship in dedicated buildings or private homes.

The churches in the UAE lack space, especially since it has become harder to use non-designated buildings like hotels and schools for gatherings in the emirate of Dubai, which was tolerated before. Although the ruling Emirati families donated land to build churches on, it remains difficult to officially establish new churches. Religious organizations are not required to register with the government, but there is a lack of clear legal designation, which results in an ambiguous legal status for many groups. This creates difficulties in carrying out administrative functions such as banking and signing leases.

According to WCD 2019 estimates, 78.4% of the residents in UAE are Muslim, 15% of these are Shiite. These numbers include the expatriate community. Christians make up the second largest religious group in the country.

Religious Context: United Arab Emirates	Numbers	%
Christians	1,068,000	11.0
Muslim	7,593,000	78.4
Hindu	597,000	6.2
Buddhist	184,000	1.9
Ethnoreligionist	0	0.0
Jewish	0	0.0
Bahai	46,800	0.5
Atheist	14,800	0.2
Agnostic	107,000	1.1
Other	71,300	0.7

Data source: Johnson T M and Zurlo G A, eds., World Christian Database (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed April 2019). OTHER includes Chinese folk, New religionist, Sikh, Spiritist, Taoist, Confucianist, Jain, Shintoist, Zoroastrian.

Economic landscape

The [World Bank](#) ranks the UAE economy as a high income economy. The UAE holds the world's sixth-largest oil reserves and this has brought a lot of immigrants to the country where around 10% of the population are national citizens. The UAE have developed and implemented structural diversification strategies to avoid too much dependence on oil.

According to the [2019 Index of Economic Freedom](#), the country's economy ranked as the 9th most free in the world and topped the list for the Middle East and North Africa.

The report stated: "The UAE has an open economy with a high per capita income and a sizable annual trade surplus. Economic diversification has reduced the oil and gas sector's portion of GDP to 30 percent. In 2018, Abu Dhabi launched the \$5 billion Ghadan 21 (Tomorrow 2021) development plan aimed at boosting competitiveness and entrepreneurship."

[FSI](#) economic indicators show steady improvement. [HDI](#) figures confirm this finding with an employment ratio of 80.9% of the population. The literacy rate stands at 98.4% ([BTI 2018](#)).

An important event is the upcoming Expo 2020 which will be hosted by Dubai from October 2020 to April 2021. This "[mega international event](#)" is another economic opportunity to show the UAE to the world and boost its international image.

Social and cultural landscape

Culturally, the UAE is conservative, Muslim and tribal. Because only around [10% of the population](#) are Emirati, there is a dual social system with rights and privileges, fostering an Emirati identity where women wear the niqab (a veil in which only the eyes are visible) and Emiratis keep to themselves. Most migrants/expatriates live and work in their own foreign labor groups. Expatriate children often go to schools belonging to their own community group.

With thousands of Asians and Africans flocking to the rich country, social and labor abuse is a high risk. [Human Rights Watch](#) writes: "Labor abuses in the UAE persist. [Despite some reforms](#), many low-paid migrant workers remain acutely vulnerable to forced labor. The *kafala* (visa-sponsorship) system ties migrant workers to their employers. Those who leave their employers without their consent before the end of a contract [can face punishment](#) for 'absconding', including fines, prison, and deportation. A 2017 law [extended key labor protection rights](#) to domestic workers, but the provisions remain weaker than those in the country's national labor law. Domestic workers [face a range of abuses](#), including long working hours, unpaid salaries, and physical and sexual abuse." Most of the expatriates are males, who have left their families behind to find work in the UAE. As a result the UAE has a very high gender imbalance: 275 males per 100 females.

According to country experts, being Christian is an extra vulnerability in the UAE and can lead to higher levels of discrimination or abuse. However, skin color and ethnic background often play an even more important role. Hence, Western (white) Christian expatriates are far less likely to experience harassment than African or Asian Christian expatriates. In addition, high-skilled expatriates will face less issues than low-skilled ones. Hence, a low-skilled Christian migrant from an African background will be most vulnerable in the UAE.

Technological landscape

According to the US State Department's [International Religious Freedom report](#) for 2018 (page 8): "The country's two primary Internet service providers, both majority-owned by the government, continued to block certain web sites critical of Islam or supportive of religious views the government considered extremist, including Islamic sites. The service providers continued to block other sites on religion-related topics, including some with information on Judaism, Christianity, atheism, and testimonies of former Muslims who converted to Christianity." In addition, the use of VPN's is actively blocked and forbidden by law.

Reporters without Borders (RSF) [reports](#): "The United Arab Emirates have become masters of the online surveillance of journalists, who often fall victim to its 2012 cyber-crime law. The least criticism of the regime by citizen-journalists or bloggers is likely to lead to charges of defamation, insulting the state or posting false information with the aim of damaging the country's reputation, with the possibility of long jail terms and mistreatment in prison. Osama al Najjar, a citizen-journalist arrested in 2014, was still in prison in early 2019 although he completed his sentence in March 2017."

Security situation

The UAE is a strong ally of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, joining the Saudis in their 2017 [boycott of Qatar](#) and its war against the [Houthi rebels in Yemen](#) (since 2015). The UAE is also a supporter of General Haftar's Libyan National Army. At the same time, the country opposes Iran, allying itself with the USA and Saudi Arabia. The country is still contesting with Iran over the islands of Abu Musa and the Lesser and Greater Tumbs, which have been occupied by Iran since 1971.

Despite all military operations abroad, the risk of terror attacks inside the country is low. The security services maintain high levels of surveillance and all borders are well protected. Because of its strict policies, crime levels are also low. Most citizens enjoy high levels of wealth, while all non-citizens committing a crime will immediately be deported when caught or after serving their sentences.

Trends analysis

1) Political stability is expected to continue

Looking to the future, political stability can be expected as the Emirati rulers support one another. National elections do not exist and political parties are forbidden, which prevents citizens from changing their government. Government posts are mainly filled through tribal loyalties and economic power. There are some calls for greater political representation but these demands are not entertained by the rulers. For now, most of the population does not seem to be very involved in politics – the elections for the legislative institution FNC in 2006, 2011 and 2015 saw low turnouts especially in the largest and richest emirates. A generous distribution of wealth seems to appease the population at the moment, although the historically poorer northern states with their demand for political change do pose a certain risk. Also, the significant youth population - combined with a process of globalization which loosens the state's monopoly over information - indicate that the UAE will need to react to calls for more democracy in the future.

2) The UAE presents itself as a progressive Islamic nation

The UAE continues to enjoy stability within an increasingly turbulent regional context. It remains to be seen whether the UAE's more assertive posturing in the region (e.g. in respect to Somalia, Yemen, Qatar etc.) will lead to a bolstering of the UAE's influence as a progressive Islamic nation, or whether such forays will prove unsuccessful and therefore damaging to the 'brand' of Islam the UAE is seeking to portray.

If unsuccessful, or if the country gets bogged down in regional conflicts, the UAE could potentially face growing domestic discontent, and possibly the emergence and growing influence of more conservative religious factions - though this does not seem a very probable prospect at present. More immediate are economic challenges, especially for Dubai - the imperative to attract further international investment is likely to ensure a continued openness to (and tolerance of) diversity.

External Links - WWL 2020: Keys to understanding

- Link for general background information: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-14703998>. - <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-14703998>
- Recent history: BTI Research - <http://www.bti-project.org/en/reports/country-reports/detail/itc/are/>
- Recent history: ruled - <https://www.icj-cij.org/en/case/172>
- Recent history: Qatar crisis - <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-40173757>
- Recent history: Yemen war - <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-29319423>
- Recent history: divisions have become visible - <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/sep/09/saudi-arabia-and-uae-in-joint-bid-to-end-further-yemen-conflict>
- Recent history: was suspected - <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-50302602>
- Political and legal landscape: classifies - <https://www.eiu.com/topic/democracy-index>
- Political and legal landscape: Freedom of Thought Report - <https://fot.humanists.international/countries/asia-western-asia/united-arab-emirates/>
- Political and legal landscape: MEC - <https://www.meconcern.org/countries/united-arab-emirates/>
- Political and legal landscape: FSI - <https://fragilestatesindex.org/country-data/>
- Political and legal landscape: 2019 report - <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2019/united-arab-emirates>
- Political and legal landscape: Reporters Without Borders - <https://rsf.org/en/united-arab-emirates>
- Economic landscape: World Bank - <https://datahelpdesk.worldbank.org/knowledgebase/articles/906519>
- Economic landscape: 2019 Index of Economic Freedom - <http://www.heritage.org/index/country/unitedarabemirates>
- Economic landscape: FSI - <https://fragilestatesindex.org/country-data/>
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WWL 2020: Church information / United Arab Emirates

Christian origins

Archaeological findings show that the existence of Christianity was widespread in the Gulf region prior to the emergence of Islam. In antiquity, the area now forming the United Arab Emirates fell under the Nestorian diocese known as Beth Mazunaye, with a cathedral in Sohar, just on the Omani side of the border. In 1992, remains of a Nestorian church and monastery were found on the island of Sir Bani Yas, offshore of Abu Dhabi. The monastery was used from approximately 600-750 AD. Artefacts found at the site show that the people ate fish and kept cattle. Glass and ceramic objects indicate that the inhabitants traded widely across the Arabian Gulf and Indian Ocean. Another Nestorian monastery and church were discovered on the island of Marawah nearby, dating from the same period. This indicates that Christianity in the region flourished even after Islam became dominant in the area (around 630 AD according to traditional Islamic sources). Christianity in the region was strong due to mission work by Syriac Nestorians from Iraq and Persia, and due to the presence of Christian Arab tribes settling in the area.

Under pressure from Islam, Christianity disappeared until a Christian presence was re-established through Portuguese colonists, whose Roman Catholic priests settled in the 16th century in Khor Fakkan.

In 1797, the first of a series of sea battles took place between Great Britain and some sheikhdoms. Beginning in 1820, London signed agreements with these sheikhdoms that gave them exclusive trading rights. This meant the beginning of new and lasting contact with Christians for the region.

Under the protection of the British, mission work could be carried out in the sheikhdoms. Western missionaries started in the early 19th century by building mission hospitals. "As early as 1841 a Roman Catholic priest travelled through the region. In 1889 the vicariate of Arabia was erected at Aden. South Yemen expelled the vicariate, which relocated to Abu Dhabi in 1973. In the 1970s, the vicariate had 11 parishes and 15 chapels, two of which were in the UAE. Both parishes were founded in the 1960s and serve expatriates." (Source: Melton J.G. and Baumann M., eds., *Religions of the world*, p.2960.) There are currently 9 Catholic church buildings in UAE.

"Protestantism entered the area in 1890 in the person of Samuel M. Zwemer (1867–1952) of the Reformed Church in America; Zwemer eventually settled in Bahrain. The Church of England established work once the British acquired some hegemony in the Gulf. Parishes in the region emerged only in the 1960s and were limited to expatriates from the British Isles. The primary Anglican parish, St. Andrew's Church in Abu Dhabi, is now attached to the Diocese of Cyprus and the Gulf, a diocese within the Episcopal Church in Jerusalem and the Middle East. Other Protestant/Free church ministries include the Christian Brethren, The Evangelical Alliance Mission (TEAM), and the Reformed Presbyterian Church, Evangelical Synod. The small work of the Seventh-day Adventist Church is attached to the Gulf Section in the Middle East Union Mission. Also, members of various Orthodox churches have relocated to the UAE." (Source: Melton J.G. and Baumann M., eds., *Religions of the world*, p.2961.)

Oil was first discovered in 1958. After the boom in oil prices in 1973, the number of Christian expatriates grew fast. Foreigners are predominantly from Asia and the Middle East. Of the total population, about 11% is Christian. Most major church denominations hold worship meetings in the UAE.

Church spectrum today

There are approximately 40 church buildings in the country and some of the recognized churches have more than fifty different church groups under their wing. However, in the Emirate of Dubai alone the number of church groups operating outside the recognized church buildings is probably higher than 150. The number of existing churches is clearly not large enough to cater for demand. They also have to be careful in their contact with the Muslim population, especially because anything which could be construed as proselytizing Muslims is strictly prohibited. Churches have to be careful about accepting converts into their congregations and often apply strict self-censorship in this area.

Church networks: United Arab Emirates	Christians	%
Orthodox	78,800	7.4
Catholic	940,000	88.0
Protestant	30,300	2.8
Independent	16,900	1.6
Unaffiliated	29,400	2.8
Doubly-affiliated Christians	-27,400	-2.6
Total	1,068,000	100.0
<i>(Any deviation from the total number of Christians stated above is due to the rounding of decimals)</i>		
Evangelical movement	14,400	1.3
Renewalist movement	266,000	24.9

Data source: Johnson T M and Zurlo G A, eds., *World Christian Database* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed April 2019).

Orthodox: Eastern (Chalcedonian), Oriental (Pre-Chalcedonian, Non-Chalcedonian, Monophysite), Nestorian (Assyrian), and non-historical Orthodox. Roman Catholics: All Christians in communion with the Church of Rome. Protestants: Christians in churches originating in or in communion with the Western world's 16th-century Protestant Reformation. Includes Anglicans, Lutherans and Baptists (any of whom may be Charismatic) and denominational Pentecostals, but not Independent traditions such as Independent Baptists nor independent Charismatics. Independents: Believers who do not identify with the major Christian traditions (Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Protestant). Unaffiliated Christians: Persons professing publicly to be Christians but who are not affiliated to churches. Doubly-affiliated Christians: Persons affiliated to or claimed by 2 denominations at once. Evangelical movement: Churches, denominations, and individuals who identify themselves as evangelicals by membership in denominations linked to evangelical alliances (e.g., World Evangelical Alliance) or by self-identification in polls. Renewalist movement: Church members involved in Pentecostal/Charismatic renewal.

WWL 2020: Persecution Dynamics / United Arab Emirates

Reporting period

1 November 2018 – 31 October 2019. During the WWL 2020 reporting period, several experts were consulted to compare the levels of pressure in UAE with those in neighboring Gulf countries. This has resulted in a slightly higher score for some *spheres of life*.

Position on World Watch List (WWL)

With a score of 60 points, UAE ranked 47 in WWL 2020. The score rose from 58 points in WWL 2019 (rank 45). Thus, in WWL 2020, UAE increased in score by 2 points but went down in rank two places. The average pressure on Christians is at a very high level (11.8), an increase from 11.3 in WWL 2019. The main reason for this rise is a higher level of reported pressure on converts from an Emirati background.

Persecution engines

Persecution engines: United Arab Emirates	Abbreviation	Level of influence
Islamic oppression	IO	Strong
Religious nationalism	RN	Not at all
Clan and ethnic antagonism	CEA	Medium
Christian denominational protectionism	CDP	Not at all
Communist and post - Communist oppression	CPCO	Not at all
Secular intolerance	SI	Not at all
Dictatorial paranoia	DPA	Medium
Organized corruption and crime	OCC	Not at all

The scale for the level of influence of Persecution engines in society is: Not at all / Very weak / Weak / Medium / Strong / Very strong. For more information see WWL Methodology.

Islamic oppression (Strong) / Clan and ethnic antagonism (Medium):

Islam dominates private and public life, as well as political discourse in the seven emirates. Consequently, all citizens are understood to be Muslim. The law does not recognize conversion from Islam to Christianity, and officially the legal punishment is death. Christian converts from a Muslim background are at times compelled to appear to be Muslims and hide their faith. Even though there are no reported cases of the death penalty being enforced against converts, the mere fact that the law exists is an effective deterrent.

Tribalism is very much mixed with Islam and hence leaving Islam is interpreted as betraying one's family. In general, families put strong social pressure on converts to make them return to Islam, leave the region or to be silent about their new faith. Besides this, some ethnic Arabs regard foreign Christians as a threat to their religion, culture and language.

Levels of persecution vary for converts from Islam to Christianity. Those from an Emirati background face highest levels of pressure. For converts from Islam with other backgrounds (such as those originating from Pakistan, Indonesia, Sudan, Mali as well as other Asian, African or Arab countries), much depends on the response within their surrounding community in the UAE. As long as they do not create unrest, they have less to fear from the UAE government, although their Emirati employers could end their contracts, which would result in deportation if they were unable to find another job. Within those expatriate communities, the consequences for converts depend more on the cultural norms from their home country than on the cultural practices of the UAE. For expatriates, conversion to Christianity is sometimes easier than in their home country, because family and relatives are far away and social pressure is possibly less acute.

Dictatorial paranoia (Medium):

The UAE is not a democracy. The country is ruled by a dynasty that does not recognize various fundamental human rights. The rulers exert pressure on society and do not allow any dissent. Since the Persecution engines *Islamic oppression* and *Dictatorial paranoia* overlap to a certain degree, the government also shows characteristics of *Islamic oppression* by limiting the rights of Christians compared to Muslims, especially regarding church life.

Drivers of persecution

Drivers of Persecution: United Arab Emirates	IO	RN	CEA	CDP	CPCO	SI	DPA	OCC
	STRONG	-	MEDIUM	-	-	-	MEDIUM	-
Government officials	Medium	-	-	-	-	-	Medium	-
Ethnic group leaders	Medium	-	Medium	-	-	-	-	-
Non-Christian religious leaders	Medium	-	Medium	-	-	-	-	-

Religious leaders of other churches	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Violent religious groups	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Ideological pressure groups	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Citizens (people from the broader society), including mobs	Strong	-	Medium	-	-	-	-	-
One's own (extended) family	Strong	-	Strong	-	-	-	-	-
Political parties	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Revolutionaries or paramilitary groups	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Organized crime cartels or networks	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Multilateral organizations (e.g. UN, OIC etc.) and embassies	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-

The scale for the level of influence of Drivers of persecution in society is: Not at all / Very weak / Weak / Medium / Strong / Very strong. Please note that "-" denotes "not at all". For more information see WWL Methodology.

Drivers of Islamic oppression / Clan and ethnic antagonism:

- **Extended family (Strong):** Although clearly mixed with issues of family honor, strongly held Islamic convictions are a significant reason for families to target family members who convert to Christianity. Conversion from Islam to Christianity is socially unacceptable. Converts face the risk of being ostracized by their families and they might even be killed for shaming the family name.
- **Government officials (Medium):** The government will act against any Christians attempting to speak openly about their faith, since proselytizing is illegal and punishable under the law. Conversion from Islam to Christianity is strongly discouraged and, according to the US State Department's [International Religious Freedom Report](#) for 2018, "the penal code defers to Sharia on matters defined as crimes in Islamic doctrine, which in many interpretations prohibits apostasy".

- **Ethnic groups leaders (Medium):** Tribal leaders, often the eldest sons of their families, have a duty to protect the (extended) family and look after the well being, as well as the family honor of the whole group. They see it as their duty to put pressure on a convert to recant Christianity or to pressurize the family into taking action against an apostate family member. In the case of expatriate communities, community leaders might apply pressure in line with the cultural norms of the home country.
- **Citizens (people from the broader society) (Medium):** Conservative Islamic society is the biggest threat to Christians in UAE. Emiratis expect Islamic governance from their rulers, with Sharia law being the [principal source of legislation](#).
- **Non-Christian religious leaders (Medium):** Although the UAE government strictly controls all preaching in mosques and has a policy against religious hate-speech, Muslim religious leaders keep society conservative and encourage family and society to take action against converts.

In addition, ethnic Arab Emiratis are at the top of the social ladder and look down upon foreigners, especially the poor and low-skilled workers from South East Asia and Africa. Employees are tied to their employers and thus vulnerable to their bosses' demands. The latter can easily discriminate, humiliate or abuse low-skilled expatriate Christians. The latter can also face discrimination and mistreatment from their fellow Muslim expatriates.

Drivers of Dictatorial paranoia:

- **Government officials (Medium):** The UAE government does not allow criticism, especially not from (foreign) Christians. According to [Freedom House's](#) 2019 report: "A number of laws adopted in recent years give authorities broad discretion to punish individuals' speech on sensitive topics. The 2012 cybercrime law ... introduced lengthy prison terms for vaguely worded offenses such as damaging 'the reputation or the stature of the state or any of its institutions'. A 2014 counterterrorism law prescribes punishments including the death penalty for offenses like 'undermining national security' and possession of material that opposes or denigrates Islam. A 2015 law against hate-speech and discrimination contained loosely worded definitions and criminalized a wide range of free speech activities. These and other criminal laws have been actively enforced, including against ordinary social media users." In this environment, Christians always have to operate carefully.

Geographical hotspots of persecution

The Emirates of Abu Dhabi, Dubai and Sharjah host most of the Christians living in the UAE and apply similar levels of restrictions on Christians and churches. They also leave expatriate Christians relatively free to practice their faith. The other four states of the UAE are less populated and have a higher ratio of Emiratis; as a result these states are more conservative. For instance, the Emirates of Ajman and Umm Al Quwain are the only emirates without designated church buildings.

Christian communities and how they are affected

Of the four WWL categories of Christianity, two exist in UAE and are affected by persecution:

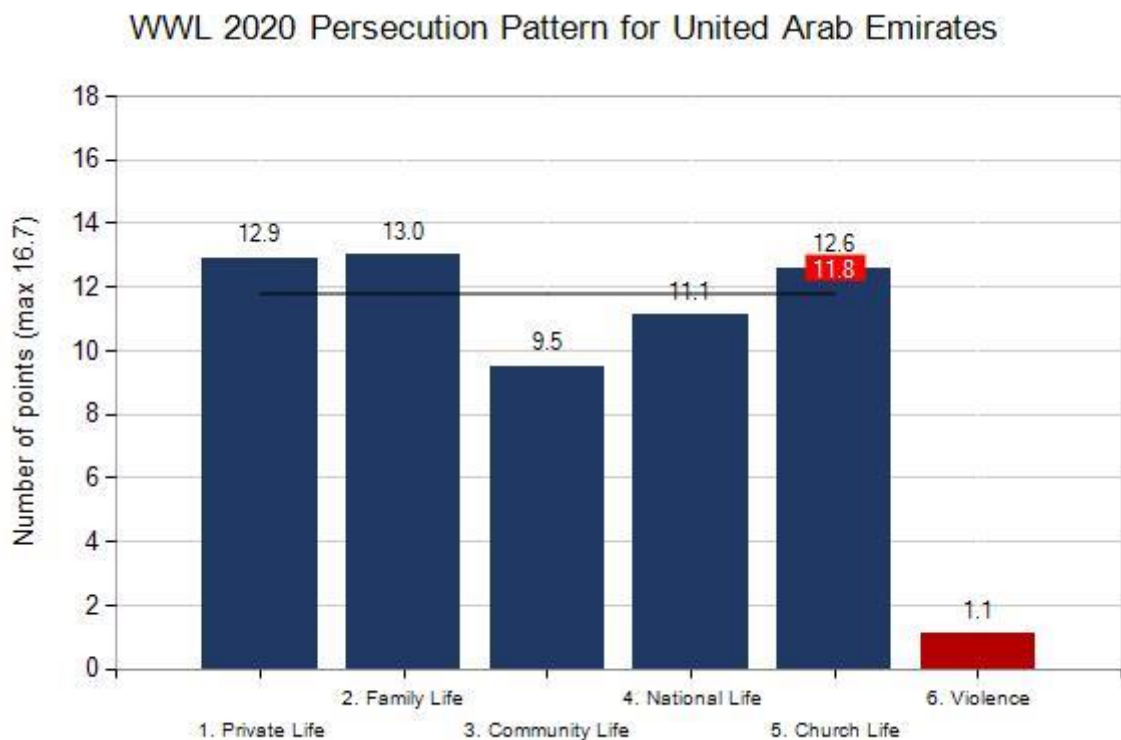
Communities of expatriate Christians: The majority of Christians in UAE belong to this group which enjoys some freedom but also faces certain restrictions. African and Asian expatriates do not have as much freedom as Western ones, but do have more freedom than converts (see below), as long as they do not evangelize Muslims.

Historical Christian communities: There are no historical Christian communities in UAE (other than expatriate ones covered in the first category above.)

Converts to Christianity: Converts from Islam to Christianity are the most vulnerable Christian group in the country. They are under severe pressure from relatives, family and Muslim society due to the Islamic government, law and culture.

Non-traditional Christian communities: There are no non-traditional Christian communities in UAE (other than expatriate ones covered in the first category above).

The Persecution pattern



The WWL 2020 Persecution pattern for UAE shows:

- The average pressure on Christians is at a very high level (11.8 points), an increase from 11.3 in WWL 2019. The main reason for this rise is that pressure on converts from an Emirati background was reported to be slightly higher.

- Although all spheres of life show high and very high levels of pressure, pressure is highest in *Family, Private* and *Church life* (all 12.0 points and above). This reflects on the one hand the difficult situation for convert Christians who face very high pressure from their (extended) family. On the other hand, church life is difficult for both convert and expatriate Christians, as proselytizing and integrating converts from a Muslim background are socially unacceptable.
- The score for violence went down from 1.9 in WWL 2019 to 1.1 in WWL 2020. The low level of violence against Christians is typical for a Gulf country. The government does not have to act against Christians as the pressure from society is very high and Christians practice self-restraint. There were less reports of incidents during WWL 2020 but it is probable that violence has been under-reported.

Pressure in the 5 spheres of life

In each of the five spheres of life discussed below, details are shown from four of the highest scoring block questions, with those items scoring highest listed first. In some cases, an additional paragraph per sphere is included to give further information deemed important. (To see how individual questions are scored on a scale 0 – 4 points, please see the “WWL Scoring example” in the WWL Methodology, available at: <http://opendoorsanalytical.org/world-watch-list-documentation/>, password: freedom.

Private sphere:

- ***It has been risky for Christians to discuss their faith with those other than immediate family members (extended family, others) (Block 1.8 / Score: 3.5 points):*** The main source of pressure for Christians with a Muslim background is from family and community. Most indigenous Christians exercise extreme caution in discussing issues of faith with family and community members. The government prohibits proselytizing for any religion other than Islam; this means all categories of Christian have to be careful when discussing faith with Emirati citizens or other Muslims. Opposing or criticizing Islam is also prohibited by law, so choosing the right wording is important when discussing issues of faith.
- ***Conversion has been opposed, forbidden, or punishable, including conversion from one type of Christianity to another (Block 1.1 / Score: 3.25 points):*** Emirati Christians face very high pressure and their number is subsequently very low. Such rejection of conversion is rooted in the apostasy provisions of Islamic law and as such represents a permanent pressure. For non-Emirati converts, the pressure depends on their community and the presence of family members, which often apply the same cultural norms as in their home country. Because family members are often far away in the home country, some converts have more freedom in the UAE than in their home country. Nevertheless, they still face a lot of pressure in most cases.
- ***It has been risky for Christians to reveal their faith in written forms of personal expression (including expressions in blogs and Facebook etc.) (Block 1.4 / Score: 3.25 points):*** This is mainly a risk for converts from Islam to Christianity as revealing their faith publicly could lead to negative repercussions from disapproving family or community members. Expatriate Christians are free to express their faith online, but cannot openly be involved in proselytization.

- ***It has been risky for Christians to display Christian images or symbols (Block 1.5 / Score: 3.25 points):*** Converts to Christianity face the biggest risks, as displaying Christian symbols could lead to discovery of their faith and subsequent repercussions. For most expatriate Christians, the private display of religious symbols (e.g. as jewellery), is not problematic - although many would choose to do so discreetly out of respect for the local culture.

Due to the serious social discrimination and stigma against Christians, openly possessing Christian materials is dangerous especially for Muslims who might be considering converting or who have already converted but have not risked being identified as Christian for safety reasons.

Family sphere:

- ***Christian children have been pressured to attend anti-Christian or majority religion teaching at any level of education (Block 2.8 / Score: 3.5 points):*** Islamic education is compulsory for all students within state schools and for Muslim students within the private school sector. This means that children of converts have to attend Islamic education. No alternative religious education is provided in state schools for non-Muslims. Private schools can apply for authorization to provide non-Islamic religious education to non-Muslim students. Most expatriate children attend private schools, in which they are exempted from Islamic instruction. However, those who cannot afford private education do have to attend Islamic classes in the state schools. Asking for an exemption, if granted, could lead to social exclusion by others.
- ***Christians have lost their inheritance rights because of their conversion to Christianity or to another church denomination (if the person was already a Christian) (Block 2.13 / Score: 3.25 points):*** This a real risk for converts from an Islamic background, as family members commonly punish them in this way. Sharia law is applied in inheritance cases, which means that a non-Muslim cannot inherit from a Muslim. However, converts from an expatriate background can request to apply the laws of their home country (which may also apply Sharia law in the case of a Muslim country).
- ***Christian spouses of non-Christians have been excluded from the right or opportunity to claim custody of the children in divorce cases (Block 2.12 / Score: 3.5 points):*** According to the US State Department's [2018 IRF report](#), "in the event of a divorce between a Muslim father and non-Muslim mother, sharia law will usually apply. Strict interpretation of sharia – which oftentimes favors the father – does not apply to child custody cases. The father, deemed the guardian, provides for the child financially, while the mother, the custodian, provides day-to-day care of the child." However, known converts, whether husband or wife, are not usually recognized as 'non-Muslim' but as 'apostate Muslim' and thus not be regarded as capable of having custody over any children.
- ***Christian baptisms have been hindered (Block 2.4 / Score: 3.25 points):*** For expatriate Christians, churches are free to conduct baptisms. For a Christian believer from a Muslim background, baptisms have to be conducted in secret. Baptism is the ultimate proof of conversion. This definite change of religion is a very sensitive issue, especially for Emirati converts. Foreign expatriate converts have more freedom, depending on the community they are part of.

Pressure in the Family sphere of life is currently the highest of all spheres and is particularly evident in cases revolving around marriage, child-upbringing, inheritance and child custody. Mixed marriage is only legal between a Muslim man and a non-Muslim woman. In the event of divorce, the law grants custody of any children of non-Muslim women who do not convert to Islam to the Muslim father. By law, a non-Muslim woman who fails to convert to Islam is also ineligible for naturalization as a citizen and cannot inherit her husband's property unless named as a beneficiary in his will.

Community sphere:

- ***Christians have been monitored by their local communities or by private groups (this includes reporting to police, being shadowed, telephone lines listened to, emails read/censored, etc.) (Block 3.2 / Score: 3.75 points):*** There is a high surveillance rate in the UAE, making it likely that individual Christians are being monitored. There is a high awareness among Christians that their (online) activities are watched. This awareness causes Christians to adapt their behavior, especially converts and those among the expatriate Christians who are keen to share their faith.
- ***Christians have been put under pressure to take part in non-Christian religious ceremonies or community events (Block 3.5 / Score: 3.25 points):*** Christian converts from a Muslim background will routinely be expected to participate in Islamic practices and traditions, especially relating to the family sphere. The month of Ramadan is the main religious event affecting all Christians in this regard. While non-Muslims are allowed to eat or drink in certain restaurants, malls and hotels, Christian migrant workers, especially those working in lower paid jobs, have to abstain from eating or drinking during the day.
- ***Christians have been hindered in participating in communal institutions, forums, etc., for faith-related reasons (Block 3.6 / Score: 3 points):*** Known converts from an Emirati background will be shunned by society and therefore excluded from participating in community activities and institutions.
- ***Christians have been pressured by their community to renounce their faith (Block 3.7 / Score: 3 points):*** Converts from a Muslim background will be placed under pressure by their specific communities to recant their faith and return to Islam. They are likely to be ostracized by society if their Christian faith is known. The level of pressure a converts face depends on their surrounding community. Emirati converts will face the highest pressure, while non-Emirati converts will have to deal with the cultural norms of their particular community. However, because many are far away from home and do not want to cause unrest (which could easily lead to deportation by the authorities), reactions can be less harsh than in the home countries.

For Christians in the UAE, community life can be difficult, although one's ethnic background can be as important as one's religious convictions, as racial prejudices and racism are prevalent in the country.

National sphere:

- ***The Constitution (or comparable national or state law) limits freedom of religion as formulated in Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (Block 4.1 / Score: 4 points):*** The Constitution of the UAE enshrines Islam as the religion of the State and Islamic law as a principal source of legislation. It upholds the freedom to perform religious ceremonies in accordance with established customs, provided that religious practice is consistent with public order and morality (which means that Islam or Islamic tenets cannot be critiqued). Blasphemy and defamation of all religions are prohibited, but only Islamic proselytism is permitted. Under applicable Islamic law, Muslims are prohibited from changing their religion. In addition, Islamic personal status laws apply for Emirati citizens, including a prohibition on Muslim women marrying non-Muslims.
- ***Have Christians, churches or Christian organizations been hindered in publicly displaying religious symbols (Block 4.12 / Score: 3.5 points):*** Most recognized churches are cautious about displaying symbols, notices and other signs publicly, and would avoid provocative messaging. Unwanted attention from the authorities can lead to repercussions like losing approval to hold church services or making it much more difficult to obtain visas for church leaders in the future. Non-recognized churches, and especially those with converts among them, exercise even more caution.
- ***Officials have at any level refused to recognize an individual's conversion as recorded in government administration systems, identity cards, etc. (Block 4.2 / Score: 3.5 points):*** Conversion from Islam to Christianity is forbidden. The UAE government cannot accept conversion away from Islam and thus will refuse to officially recognize any such conversion by an Emirati citizen. This does not apply to converts from an expatriate background, as they are foreigners and have to deal with the policies of their own embassies.
- ***Christians been hindered in expressing their views or opinions in public (Block 4.8 / points: 3.5 points):*** The UAE is not a democracy and the government suppresses all dissent. Most Christians in the UAE exercise precautionary 'self-censorship' and avoid provocation. Particularly in relation to criticism of Islam or discussion on topics of faith. The government will deport those who create 'unrest' in their view.

Church sphere:

- ***Activities of churches have been monitored, hindered, disturbed, or obstructed (Block 5.1 / Score: 3.5 points):*** There is routine monitoring of church compounds, sometimes in visible ways. It is understood that this is primarily intended for the protection of the churches and the churches are grateful for this protection. Nevertheless, the surveillance can also be used negatively (for example to identify whether Muslims are attending church activities). In 2018, the Community Development Authority of Dubai undertook a campaign to enforce laws prohibiting religious gatherings in unauthorized places more strictly. This measure was primarily intended to control possible radical Muslim or political groups. However, because a very large number of Christian groups have emerged in Dubai that meet in schools, hotels and other places of gathering, this move by the CDA has had a significant impact. Many of these groups had to cease their activities.

- **It has been risky for churches or Christian organizations to speak out against instigators of persecution (Block 5.20 / Score: 3.5 points):** Recognized churches have to operate carefully because good relationships with the government are important (for instance, for obtaining visas for church leaders). The governments of the Emirates view themselves as generous Islamic hosts and any criticism is seen as being disrespectful. Converts from a Muslim background are viewed as Muslim by the government and any public discussion about their difficult situation is regarded as an inappropriate intrusion into another religious community's affairs.
- **Have Christian communities been hindered in building or renovating church buildings or in claiming historical religious premises and places of worship which had been taken from them earlier (Block 5.3 / Score: 3.5 points):** The lack of church buildings (forcing many fellowships to share a church building with more than fifty others in some cases, or to use a conference room in a hotel or other gathering hall) is one of the biggest problems faced by the expatriate Christians. Churches cannot buy land themselves and have to request the government to allocate a plot of land to them. Permission to build churches are only granted in extraordinary cases. The Christian communities in the UAE are very active and having many churches might make the Emirati's feel uncomfortable as they perceive churches as a threat to the Islamic character of the country.
- **It has been difficult to get registration or legal status for churches at any level of government (Block 5.2 / Score: 3.5 points):** There is no single system of church registration in the UAE and each Emirate determines its own procedures for handling applications by religious organizations to form legally recognized entities. In general, a church needs a physical church building to obtain recognition. However, only rarely are new building permits granted. Any group wanting a degree of recognition must therefore apply to one of the already established churches to come under their umbrella. Some of the recognized churches have more than fifty different churches under their wings. It happens sometimes that recognized churches refuse to sponsor new congregations, if they fear that a newcomer is too outspoken or might cause problems in other ways. This creates an additional challenge, since leaders of church groups in most cases must have a visa sponsored by one of the recognized church entities. Nonetheless, as long as a registered church has capacity, there does not seem to be restrictions on who else a registered church may sponsor. Even the numbers of visas granted for church leaders is generous.

Violence

The following table is based on reported cases as much as possible. Since many incidents go unreported, the numbers below must be understood as being minimum figures. In cases where it has been impossible to count exactly, a symbolic round figure (10, 100 or 1000) is given. (A symbolic number of 10 could in reality even be 100 or more but the real number is uncertain. A symbolic number of 100 could go well over 1000 but the real number is uncertain. A symbolic number of 1000 could go well over 10,000 but, again, the real number is uncertain.) In cases where it is clear that (many) more Christians are affected, but a concrete number could be given according to the number of incidents reported, the number given has to be understood as being an absolutely minimum figure.

Violent incidents against Christians are rarely reported. The country is well policed and it is generally peaceful. However, persecution incidents involving Christian foreign workers probably go unreported because it is in nobody's interest to publicize them (the victim wants to keep his or her job and other actors like the government are not interested in making matters of this sort public knowledge). Also, it is difficult to discern whether mistreatment occurs solely due to the foreigner's Christian faith. However, in general it is assumed that the faith of non-Muslim migrant workers, including Christians, leads to extra vulnerability.

United Arab Emirates	Reporting period	Christians killed	Christians attacked	Christians arrested	Churches attacked	Christian-owned houses and shops attacked
WWL 2020	01 Nov 2018 - 31 Oct 2019	0	1100	0	0	0
WWL 2019	01 Nov 2017 - 31 Oct 2018	0	21	0	0	1
WWL 2018	01 Nov 2016 - 31 Oct 2017	0	0	0	0	0

Christians killed refers to the number of Christians killed for faith-related reasons (including state-sanctioned executions). Christians attacked refers to the number of Christians abducted, raped or otherwise sexually harassed, forced into marriage to non-Christians or otherwise physically or mentally abused (including beatings and death-threats) for faith-related reasons. Christians arrested refers to the number of Christians detained without trial or sentenced to jail, labor camp, sent to psychiatric hospital as punishment or similar things for faith-related reasons. Churches attacked refers to the number of churches or Christian buildings (schools, hospitals, cemeteries, etc.) attacked, damaged, bombed, looted, destroyed, burned down, closed or confiscated for faith-related reasons. Christian-owned houses and shops attacked refers to the number of houses of Christians or other property (including shops and businesses of Christians) attacked, damaged, bombed, looted, destroyed, burned down, closed or confiscated for faith-related reasons.

For the WWL 2020 reporting period:

- **Christians attacked:** It is widely known that house-maids working in the domestic sphere are vulnerable to incidents of (sexual) abuse. However, statistics are scarce as almost all persons, organizations and states involved have no interest in revealing the true situation: The UAE needs the domestic staff to work in households but has a shame culture and does not want a bad reputation. Also, the home countries of the house-maids need the money coming in from the thousands of migrants working in the Gulf states and do not want to put their economic interests at stake (although Philippine President Duterte imposed a temporary travel ban to Kuwait, after the body of a Philippine maid was found in a freezer).

The employers of abused house-maids are either the perpetrators of the abuse themselves or have no real interest in their well-being. The house-maids themselves are often ashamed because of the abuse and do not want to be seen as "dirty", whether in the UAE itself or by their family at home. In addition, many provide a very much needed source of income for their families in their home countries. The home families are proud of the work being done in the UAE, and the house-maid does not want to disappoint her family. Therefore, verifiable statistics and evidence of sexual abuse are very difficult to provide. It is also difficult to prove that any sexual abuse is due to the house-maid being a non-Muslim. The number given in the table above is a conservative estimate.

5 Year trends

The following three charts show the situation for Christians over the last five reporting periods.

Chart 1:

The table below, depicting average pressure, shows that the overall level of pressure on Christians has crept up since WWL 2016 and for the last four reporting periods has consistently scored between 11.1 and 11.8 points - a very high level. This is a reflection of the fact that the situation for converts in particular remains very difficult.

WWL 2016 - WWL 2020 Persecution Pattern history: United Arab Emirates	Average pressure over 5 Spheres of life
2020	11.8
2019	11.3
2018	11.6
2017	11.1
2016	10.9

Chart 2:

The chart below shows that, over the five reporting periods, there have been notable increases in pressure in the *Church sphere of life* and notable decreases in the pressure on Christians in *Community life*.

WWL 2016 - WWL 2020 Persecution Pattern for United Arab Emirates (Spheres of life)

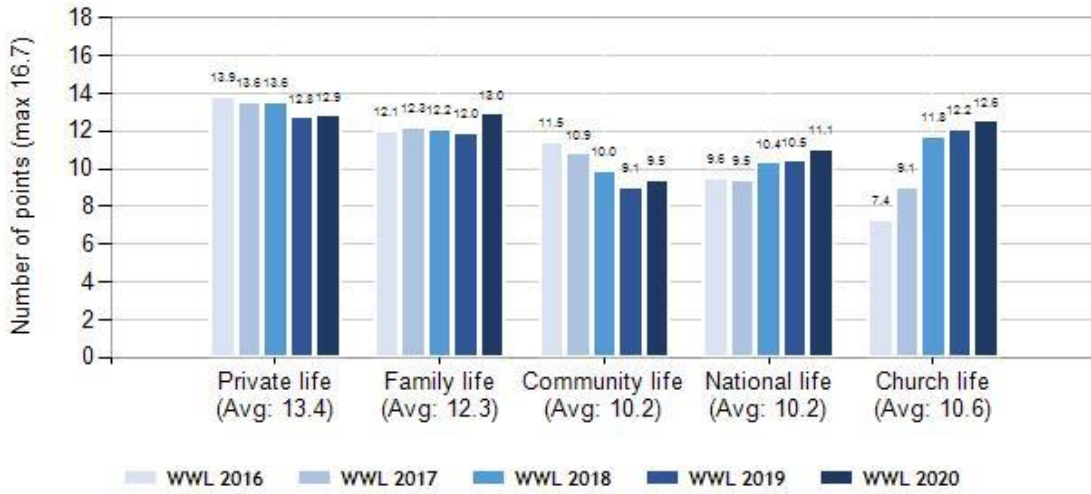
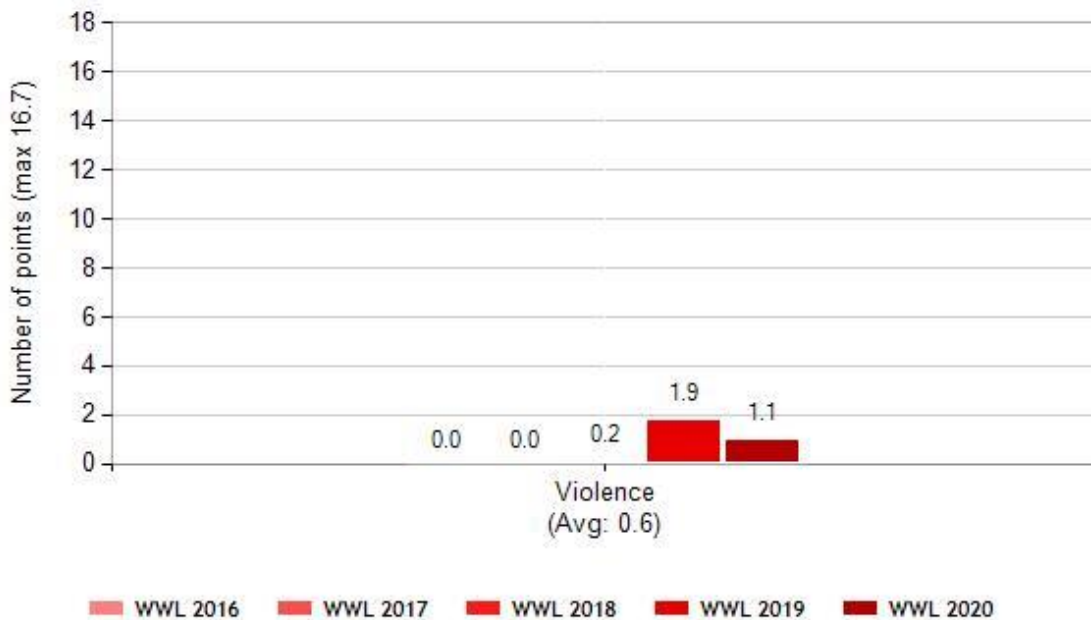


Chart 3:

The number of violent incidents recorded in the period WWL 2016 - 2018 was very low but the score rose in WWL 2019 to a low level and remained above 1.0 in WWL 2020. This pattern of low levels of violence is typical for a Gulf country.

WWL 2016 - WWL 2020 Persecution Pattern for United Arab Emirates (Violence)



Gender profile of persecution

Female Pressure Points:

- ***Denied custody of children***
- ***Denied citizenship***
- ***Denied inheritance or possessions***
- ***Denied legal ability to marry Christian spouse***
- ***Incarceration by family/house arrest***
- ***Incarceration by government***
- ***Incarceration in mental asylum***
- ***Violence – verbal***
- ***Violence – sexual***

In general, women are vulnerable in the UAE, as [domestic violence](#) and marital rape are permitted without legal consequence. Tribal society regards women as ‘inferior’ members of society in need of male guardianship and this also affects the level of persecution experienced by female converts from Islam to Christianity.

A female convert to Christianity will face immense pressure from her family to force her to convert back to Islam. If she does not, an imam may be called in to convince her of her sin, or she could be placed under house arrest, or sent to a psychiatric hospital. Even if a Christian man were willing to marry her, women who come from a Muslim background are legally restricted from marrying a non-Muslim. Furthermore, a Christian man and a convert woman cannot simply have a Christian wedding ceremony outside the law. Since Islam does not consider marriage between a non-Muslim man and a Muslim woman valid, both parties to such a union would be subject to arrest, trial, and imprisonment on grounds of engaging in an extramarital relationship, which carries a minimum of one year in prison.

Furthermore, for Christian women who are married to a Muslim man, the law grants custody of children of non-Muslim women to the Muslim father in the event of a divorce. By law, a non-Muslim woman who fails to convert is also ineligible for naturalization as a citizen and cannot inherit her husband’s property unless named as a beneficiary in his will.

Amnesty International has also reported that some laws improving the rights of foreign workers explicitly excluded domestic staff, many of whom are Christian women (Amnesty International, Annual Report 2016/17, p. 381). The ill-treatment of migrant workers, including sexual abuse, has become a major cause of concern. Although not necessarily faith-related, there are indications that non-Muslim domestic migrant workers, very many of whom are female, are more vulnerable to such abuse than Muslims.

Male Pressure Points:

- ***Denied access to social community/networks***
- ***Economic harassment via work/job/business***
- ***Forced out of home/expulsion***
- ***Forced to flee town/country***

In the UAE, men who convert to Christianity are likely to be abandoned by their families and treated as a shameful social outcasts. Familial rejection is not only an emotional blow felt by converts, it also represents a loss of social standing. Without the financial support of their families or the necessary connections to find or maintain a job, it is extremely difficult to find employment in this network-based society. Furthermore, without a family and the accompanying social status, a man will be unable to find a family willing to give their daughter permission to marry him.

If a convert has family and employment at the time of his conversion, he risks losing it all. When a man leaves Islam, he automatically by law loses custody of any children; his wife might divorce him and he can easily lose his job, which has major implications for all his family members since men are traditionally the family breadwinners.

For expatriate male Christians, any pressure they experience because of their faith is most likely encountered in the workplace.

Persecution of other religious minorities

Among expatriate communities, many other religious minority communities enjoy a similar level of freedom to Christians - even polytheistic religions.

Shia Muslims face some challenges, for political as well as religious reasons, and do not receive a comparable level of state assistance (for example, salary payments for leaders) as the majority Sunni communities. According to the US State Department's [International Religious Freedom report for 2018](#): "The government did not appoint sheikhs for Shia mosques. Shia adherents worshiped in and maintained their own mosques. The government considered all Shia mosques to be private; however, they were eligible to receive some funds from the government upon request." [UAE IRFR 2018, p. 9].

Future outlook for the church

The outlook for Christians as viewed through the lens of:

- **Islamic oppression:** The treatment of non-authorized churches by the Dubai authorities has been heavy-handed in the past and the continuing lack of will by the Dubai government to consider applications for new church buildings is a reason for concern and is likely to remain an issue in other Emirates too. Emirati society is likely to remain conservative in the coming years and converts from Islam to Christianity, both Emirati nationals and foreign workers, are likely to continue to face high pressure from their (extended) families, employers and society.
- **Dictatorial paranoia:** It is unlikely that the UAE government will change its suspicious approach towards all kinds of associations and meetings, including church meetings. Monitoring will continue and the government will probably keep up its strict control over anything that could cause public unrest, including evangelism.

External Links - WWL 2020: Persecution Dynamics

- Drivers of persecution: International Religious Freedom Report - <https://www.state.gov/reports/2018-report-on-international-religious-freedom/united-arab-emirates/>
- Drivers of persecution: principal source of legislation - https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/United_Arab_Emirates_2004.pdf
- Drivers of persecution: Freedom House's - <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2019/united-arab-emirates>
- Pressure in the 5 spheres of life : 2018 IRF report - <https://www.state.gov/reports/2018-report-on-international-religious-freedom/united-arab-emirates/>
- Gender profile of persecution: domestic violence - <http://https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2019/country-chapters/united-arab-emirates>
- Persecution of other religious minorities: International Religious Freedom report for 2018 - <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/UNITED-ARAB-EMIRATES-2018-INTERNATIONAL-RELIGIOUS-FREEDOM-REPORT.pdf>

Additional reports and articles

WWR in-depth reports

A selection of in-depth reports is available at: <http://opendoorsanalytical.org/reports/>
(password: freedom).

At the time of publication there were no items specifically for the UAE.

World Watch Monitor news articles

Articles are available at: <https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/countries/uae>.

Recent country developments

Up-to-date articles are available at: <http://opendoorsanalytical.org/?s=United+Arab+Emirates>
(password: freedom).