



UNITED ARAB EMIRATES: Country Dossier

June 2018



OpenDoors

Serving persecuted **Christians** worldwide

Open Doors International / World Watch Research Unit

June 2018 / 2

research@od.org

www.opendoorsanalytical.org

World Watch List 2018

		1. Private Life	2. Family Life	3. Community Life	4. National Life	5. Church Life	6. Violence	TOTAL SCORE WWL 2018	TOTAL SCORE WWL 2017	TOTAL SCORE WWL 2016	TOTAL SCORE WWL 2015	TOTAL SCORE WWL 2014
Rank	Country	Score	Score	Score	Score	Score	Score	Score	Score	Score	Score	Score
1	North Korea	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	10.6	94	92	92	92	90
2	Afghanistan	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	10.0	93	89	88	81	78
3	Somalia	16.0	16.2	16.1	16.3	16.4	10.4	91	91	87	90	80
4	Sudan	14.2	14.5	14.3	15.6	16.0	12.0	87	87	84	80	73
5	Pakistan	14.4	13.5	13.8	15.0	13.1	16.7	86	88	87	79	77
6	Eritrea	15.2	14.5	15.8	16.1	15.2	9.4	86	82	89	79	72
7	Libya	15.2	15.3	14.2	15.7	15.5	10.4	86	78	79	76	71
8	Iraq	14.7	14.7	14.9	14.9	15.1	11.3	86	86	90	86	78
9	Yemen	16.7	16.6	16.4	16.5	16.7	2.6	85	85	78	73	74
10	Iran	14.0	14.1	14.5	15.8	16.4	10.0	85	85	83	80	77
11	India	12.6	12.7	13.2	14.7	12.9	14.4	81	73	68	62	55
12	Saudi Arabia	14.9	13.7	14.2	15.5	16.4	4.1	79	76	76	77	78
13	Maldives	15.2	15.5	13.5	15.8	16.7	1.1	78	76	76	78	77
14	Nigeria	11.8	11.5	13.1	12.1	12.1	16.5	77	78	78	78	70
15	Syria	14.4	14.3	14.1	14.5	14.7	3.7	76	86	87	83	79
16	Uzbekistan	15.5	12.1	13.0	13.1	16.0	3.5	73	71	70	69	68
17	Egypt	11.3	12.8	12.2	11.7	9.5	12.4	70	65	64	61	61
18	Vietnam	12.4	8.4	12.7	14.2	13.8	7.4	69	71	66	68	65
19	Turkmenistan	15.2	10.3	12.9	12.8	15.2	1.9	68	67	66	63	62
20	Laos	12.9	8.6	13.6	13.9	14.9	3.5	67	64	58	58	62
21	Jordan	13.2	13.3	11.5	10.9	13.0	4.3	66	63	59	56	56
22	Tajikistan	13.3	11.3	11.8	11.8	12.9	4.3	65	58	58	50	47
23	Malaysia	12.0	14.9	12.8	12.4	9.3	3.9	65	60	58	55	49
24	Myanmar	11.6	11.1	13.2	10.4	11.0	7.8	65	62	62	60	59
25	Nepal	12.6	11.9	10.7	11.5	12.4	4.6	64		(not in WWL)		
26	Brunei	14.3	14.2	10.7	10.2	13.5	0.9	64	64	61	58	57
27	Qatar	13.4	12.9	11.7	11.3	14.1	0.0	63	66	65	64	63
28	Kazakhstan	12.8	10.0	10.2	12.2	13.7	3.7	63	56	55	51	49
29	Ethiopia	9.8	10.0	10.8	10.9	10.5	10.4	62	64	67	61	65
30	Tunisia	11.9	13.2	10.6	10.7	12.0	3.9	62	61	58	55	55
31	Turkey	12.5	9.7	9.8	11.7	9.6	8.7	62	57	55	52	(not in WWL)
32	Kenya	12.0	10.9	10.0	7.9	11.7	9.4	62	68	68	63	48
33	Bhutan	11.9	11.6	12.4	11.4	13.1	1.1	62	61	56	56	54
34	Kuwait	13.4	12.6	11.6	10.9	12.3	0.4	61	57	56	49	50
35	Central African Republic	9.0	8.1	10.1	8.9	8.8	16.1	61	58	59	67	67
36	Palestinian Territories	12.1	12.8	10.7	10.5	12.6	1.1	60	64	62	58	53
37	Mali	11.4	9.6	11.2	8.1	9.2	9.6	59	59	55	52	54
38	Indonesia	10.3	11.0	11.5	10.0	9.3	6.9	59	55	55	50	46
39	Mexico	8.3	7.6	12.1	10.7	9.7	10.4	59	57	56	55	(not in WWL)
40	United Arab Emirates	13.6	12.2	10.0	10.4	11.8	0.2	58	55	55	49	51
41	Bangladesh	10.4	8.8	11.4	9.6	7.5	10.0	58	63	57	51	46
42	Algeria	12.3	13.1	7.5	10.4	12.4	2.0	58	58	56	55	54
43	China	9.2	7.2	8.0	10.7	13.3	9.1	57	57	57	57	51
44	Sri Lanka	11.1	7.6	10.5	11.3	10.1	6.9	57	55	(not in WWL)	51	55
45	Azerbaijan	13.1	9.1	9.3	11.1	12.4	2.4	57	(not in WWL)	57	50	(not in WWL)
46	Oman	12.1	12.2	9.9	9.4	12.6	1.1	57	53	53	55	56
47	Mauritania	11.5	11.3	11.1	12.2	11.0	0.0	57	55	(not in WWL)	50	51
48	Bahrain	12.9	13.1	10.2	9.9	10.3	0.2	57	54	54	(not in WWL)	48
49	Colombia	7.9	7.6	11.9	8.6	8.5	11.9	56	53	55	55	56
50	Djibouti	12.2	12.2	10.3	9.9	11.7	0.0	56	57	58	60	46

WWL 2018 Persecution Watch Countries¹

		1. Private Life	2. Family Life	3. Community Life	4. National Life	5. Church Life	6. Violence	TOTAL SCORE WWL 2018
Rank	Country	Score	Score	Score	Score	Score	Score	Score
51	Comoros	11.7	11.5	9.1	9.4	13.9	0.4	56
52	Kyrgyzstan	11.7	9.5	10.0	8.1	11.6	2.8	54
53	Tanzania	10.1	10.3	10.1	9.5	9.0	3.9	53
54	Russian Federation	11.1	8.4	10.1	8.9	10.7	2.0	51
55	Morocco	10.4	11.5	7.6	8.8	12.0	0.6	51
56	Cuba	8.5	4.9	10.7	10.4	12.2	2.4	49
57	Uganda	10.9	8.7	9.5	8.7	4.8	3.9	46
58	Niger	9.9	9.7	9.0	7.0	7.1	2.6	45

¹ These countries reached a score of 41 points or more but did not receive enough points to be included in the WWL Top 50.

UNITED ARAB EMIRATES (UAE) – Country Dossier (June 2018)

No copyright - This report is the property of World Watch Research (WWR), the research department of Open Doors International. It may be used and distributed free of charge, but please always acknowledge WWR as the source.

Contents

World Watch List 2018.....	1
Introduction	2
WWL 2018: Keys to understanding UNITED ARAB EMIRATES (UAE).....	3
WWL 2018: Church History and Facts.....	5
WWL 2018: Short & Simple Persecution Profile	7
WWL 2018: Persecution Dynamics	8
WWR in-depth reports.....	15
Open Doors article(s) from the region.....	16
World Watch Monitor news articles.....	16
Recent country developments.....	16

Introduction

This country report is a collation of documents based around [Open Doors World Watch List \(WWL\)](#)¹ including statistical information on world religions, Christian denominations, and people groups prepared by the World Christian Database ([WCD](#))². Further news and analysis is supplied by [World Watch Monitor](#)³ and WWR staff.

UNITED ARAB EMIRATES (UAE)		
World Watch List	Score	Rank
WWL 2018	58	40
WWL 2017	55	44
WWL 2016	55	47
WWL 2015	49	49

¹ See: <https://www.opendoorsuk.org/persecution/countries/>

² WCD website: <http://www.brill.com/publications/online-resources/world-christian-database>

³ See: <https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/>

WWL 2014	51	35
----------	----	----

WWL 2018: Keys to understanding UNITED ARAB EMIRATES (UAE)

Link for general background information:

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

Recent country history

The 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 served as a model for the establishment of the GCC – Gulf Cooperation Council.⁴ Yet there are some clear differences between the several emirates. Especially Abu Dhabi (the largest emirate) and Dubai are the richest emirates and have more influence – UAE's President Khalifa bin Zayid Al-Nuhayyan is the ruler of Abu Dhabi. The northern states are poorer, for instance Sharjah, which is also more conservative. All emirates have a seat in the 'Federal Supreme Council' – the highest constitutional, executive and legislative authority.

The religious landscape

Like many countries in the region, society in UAE defines itself mainly by its religion. Thus, Islam dominates private, public life as well as the political discourse of the kingdom. Consequently, all citizens are defined as Muslims. The law of the kingdom does not recognize conversion from Islam to Christianity, and the legal punishment is death. To avoid the death penalty, social stigma or other penalties, Christian converts from a Muslim background are at times compelled to return to Islam, hide their faith, or travel to another country where their conversion is allowed. Even though there are no reported cases of the death penalty being enforced against such converts, the mere fact that the law exists is frightening. In addition, the government does not allow any formal or informal education that includes religious teaching other than Islam. Evangelism is prohibited, but non-Muslim groups can worship in dedicated buildings or private homes.

The political landscape

UAE is not a democracy and the rulers exert pressure on society, allowing no 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 religion, press, assembly, association and expression are severely restricted in the kingdom. There is no space for or recognition of political parties, according to Freedom House which rated the country as "not free" in its 2017 report.⁵ In the WWL 2018 reporting period, Reporters Without Borders also listed many instances where

⁴ <http://www.bti-project.org/en/reports/country-reports/detail/itc/are/>, last accessed on 27 July 2017.

⁵ <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2017/ united-arab-emirates>, last accessed on 27 July 2017.

freedom of the press and expression were curtailed and critics faced prosecution. The constitutional provision regarding religious freedom has claw-back-clauses. On the one hand, it provides for religious freedom, on the other hand, it states that the practice of freedom of religion should not violate established customs, public policy or public morals. Blasphemy is prohibited. Apostasy is punishable by death.

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 the 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 in the world's fourth richest state per capita. 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.

The socio-economic landscape

While the UAE had depended predominantly on the fishing and pearl industry in the past, this changed after oil was found in the fifties and first exported from Abu Dhabi in the early sixties. Today the UAE holds the world's sixth-largest oil reserves and this has brought a lot of immigrants to the country where only 15% of the population are national citizens. The UAE have developed and implemented structural diversification strategies to avoid too much dependence on oil.

In 2017, the country's economy ranks as the 8th freest in the world, and first in the Middle East and North Africa.⁶ According to the Heritage Foundation: "Recent years' broad-based and dynamic growth in the United Arab Emirates has been underpinned by continuous efforts to strengthen the business climate, boost investment, and foster the emergence of a more vibrant and diverse private sector. The generally liberal trade regime has helped to sustain momentum for growth. The UAE aims to be a regional financial hub, and its banking sector is resilient."⁷

Concluding remarks

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 and 2011 saw low turnouts especially in the largest and richest emirates. An equal distribution of wealth seems to appease the population at the moment, though the historically poorer northern states with their demand for political change do pose a certain risk. Emirate-wide, a

⁶ <http://www.heritage.org/index/country/unitedarabemirates>, last accessed on 27 July 2017.

⁷ <http://www.heritage.org/index/country/unitedarabemirates>, last accessed on 27 July 2017.

significant youth population combined with a process of globalization which loosens the state's monopoly over information and a high unemployment rate do imply that the UAE should start to take the call for more democracy seriously. Externally the country is facing confrontation with Iran over the islands of Abu Musa and the Lesser and Greater Tumbs, which have been occupied by Iran since 1971.

Furthermore, the UAE joined Saudi Arabia in its boycott of Qatar since June 2017. The Qatari crisis seems only to be a major test for Qatar at the moment, but the ongoing tensions might also affect the Emirate in the long term because the high dependency on trade requires an open and non-hostile environment.

WWL 2018: Church History and Facts

How many Christians?

Pop 2017	Christians	Chr%
9,398,000	1,206,000	12.8

Source: WCD, May 2017

How did Christians get there?

Archaeological findings show that Christianity was quite widespread in the Gulf region prior to the emergence of Islam. In modern times, Christianity came to the Gulf region with the arrival of Western missionaries in the early 19th century who built mission hospitals. "As early as 1841 a Roman Catholic priest of the Servites 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 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."⁸

"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."⁹

⁸ Melton, J.G. and Baumann, M., (editors) Religions of the world, p.2960.

⁹ Ibid, pp.2960-61.

What church networks exist today? ¹⁰

Orthodox	Catholic	Protestant	Independent	Unaffiliated	Double-aff	Evangelical	Renewalist
76,300	1,087,000	31,000	16,300	28,700	-33,400	10,800	160,000

Source: WCD, May 2017

Today's Christians in the UAE are mostly expatriates from Asia, but large numbers also come from Africa and the West.

Religious context (selection)

Christian	Muslim	Hindu	Buddhist	Ethno-religionist	Jewish	Bahai	Atheist & others ¹¹
1,206,000	7,174,000	601,000	178,000	-	-	46,800	126,300

Also note: Sikh: 65,800 Source: WCD, May 2017

According to WCD statistics, the majority of UAE's inhabitants are Muslim (76.3%). Christians make up the second largest religious group in the country.

Notes on the current situation

As with other Gulf States such as Kuwait and Bahrain, the UAE are relatively open and tolerant toward religions other than Islam. It probably houses the highest number of (registered) churches in the entire Arabian Peninsula, and these are often built on land donated by the government. This relative religious freedom is mostly enjoyed by Western expatriates and to a lesser extent by Asians and Africans, which is also true for other human rights. Obviously this religious freedom does not entail evangelizing Muslims. Muslims who convert to Christianity often live as secret believers in their families and society because of the huge taboo of leaving Islam.

¹⁰ **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. **Evangelicals:** 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. **Renewalists:** Church members involved in Pentecostal/Charismatic renewal movements.

¹¹ This category includes Atheists, Agnostics and New religionists.

WWL 2018: Short & Simple Persecution Profile

Reporting period: 1 November 2016 - 31 October 2017

WWL 2018 Points: 58 / Position: 40

WWL 2017 Points: 55 / Position: 44

WWL 2016 Points: 55 / Position: 47

Where persecution comes from

There is a sharp contrast between how different categories of Christians in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) are treated. Emirati society is fairly tolerant towards the Christian expatriate communities, and these are relatively free to worship. On the contrary, converts from Islam to Christianity face a lot of pressure. They are mostly persecuted by their families and the surrounding society, making it unnecessary for the government to act against them. In this way, the government can actively preach and promote religious tolerance, while at the same time promoting Islam.

How Christians are suffering

Although the Christian expatriate communities (like the Hindu and Sikh communities) are relatively free to practice their faith, they also face restrictions. They are free to worship in private but have to refrain from public expressions of their faith. The government does not allow them to worship, preach or pray in public. Furthermore, the Emirati society is conservative, forcing Christians to exercise self-restraint in public. They have to be careful in their public contacts, especially because proselytizing Muslims in any way is strictly prohibited.

Converts from Islam endure the most persecution as they face pressure from family members and the local community to recant their Christian faith. This severe pressure makes it almost impossible for converts to reveal their conversion. This is probably the reason why there are hardly any reports of Christians being killed or harmed for their faith.

Examples

- According to the International Religious Freedom Report of the US State Department, in January 2016 local authorities arrested and deported three non-citizens accused of proselytizing, stating they were going door to door and “preaching a religion other than Islam,” in the emirate of Sharjah.¹² Although the report does not name the religion of the three accused, it indicates how the government enforces the laws prohibiting the proselytization of Muslims. This serves as an illustration of how difficult it is to share the Gospel with Muslims in the UAE.
- According to the International Religious Freedom Report, 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

¹² United Arab Emirates International Religious Freedom Report 2016, p. 7

considered extremist, including Muslim 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.¹³ In this way, the government actively censors the internet, which forces Christians to be careful with the online practice of their belief.

- There are too few churches in the United Arab Emirates to meet the demands. Although the ruling Emirati families donated land to build churches on, it remains difficult to 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 and created difficulties in carrying out certain administrative functions, including banking or signing leases.

WWL 2018: Persecution Dynamics

Reporting period: 1 November 2016 - 31 October 2017

WWL 2018 Points: 58 / Position: 40

WWL 2017 Points: 55 / Position: 44

WWL 2016 Points: 55 / Position: 47

Contents

Position on World Watch List (WWL).....	8
Persecution engines	9
Drivers of persecution.....	10
Context	11
Christian communities and how they are affected.....	11
Pressure in the 5 spheres of life and violence	12
Gender profile of persecution.....	14
Future outlook.....	14
Policy considerations.....	15

Position on World Watch List (WWL)

The score for UAE rose from 55 in WWL 2017 to a score of 58 in WWL 2018. More violence reported during the WWL 2018 reporting period caused some of this increase of 3 points. However, in the WWL analysis a refinement has been made concerning how the situation of

¹³ United Arab Emirates International Religious Freedom Report 2016, p. 7.

converts from Islam to Christianity is registered. In UAE this contributed to the rise in overall score.

Persecution engines

Persecution engines in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) ¹⁴	Level of influence
Islamic oppression	Very strong
Religious nationalism	Not at all
Ethnic antagonism	Medium
Denominational protectionism	Not at all
Communist and post-Communist oppression	Not at all
Secular intolerance	Not at all
Dictatorial paranoia	Medium
Organized corruption and crime	Not at all

Islamic oppression (Very strong):

Like many countries in the region, society in UAE is defined mainly by its religion. Thus, Islam dominates private and public life, as well as political discourse in the kingdom. Consequently, all citizens are understood to be Muslims. The law of the kingdom does not recognize conversion from Islam to Christianity, and officially the legal punishment is death, although capital punishment is only rarely carried out. To avoid the death penalty, social stigma or other penalties, Christian converts from a Muslim background are at times compelled to appear to be Muslims and hide their faith, or travel to another country where their conversion is allowed. Even though there are no reported cases of the death penalty being enforced against converts, the mere fact that the law exists is frightening. In addition, the government does not allow any religious teaching other than Islam in public schools. Evangelism is prohibited, but non-Muslim groups can worship in dedicated buildings or private homes.

Ethnic antagonism (Medium):

This persecution engine describes the continuing influence and enforcement of age-old norms and values. In the United Arab Emirates it is very much mixed with Islam and especially affects converts from Islam. As in the rest of the Middle East, religion is connected to family identity. Therefore, 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. In many cases, converts are alienated from their families as a result of their conversion.

Besides this, some ethnic Arabs see foreign Christians as a threat to their religion, culture and language (as Arabic is seen as the holy language of the Quran). Hence, they also treat Christians as such.

¹⁴ The scale for the level of influence of Persecution engines and Drivers in society is: Not at all / Very weak / Weak / Medium / Strong / Very strong.

Dictatorial paranoia (Medium):

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 non-Christians.

Drivers of persecution

Drivers of persecution in the United Arab Emirates (UAE)	Level of influence
Government officials at any level from local to national	Medium
Ethnic group leaders	Strong
Non-Christian religious leaders at any level from local to national	Strong
Christian religious leaders at any level from local to national	Not at all
Violent religious groups	Not at all
Ideological pressure groups	Not at all
Normal citizens (people from the general public), including mobs	Strong
Own (extended) family	Strong
Political parties at any level from local to national	Not at all
Revolutionaries or paramilitary groups	Not at all
Organized crime cartels or networks	Not at all
Multilateral organizations (e.g. UN) and embassies	Not at all

Drivers of Islamic oppression:

Conservative Islamic society is the biggest threat to Christians in UAE. The conservative Emiratis expect Islamic governance from their rulers, with Sharia law being a principal source of legislation.¹⁵ The government will act against any Christian who makes an attempt to share the Gospel, since proselytizing is illegal and punishable under the law. No Christians have been prosecuted for proselytizing, but some have been expelled from the country in recent years.

Drivers of Ethnic antagonism:

Conversion from Islam to Christianity is socially totally unacceptable. Converts face the risk to be ostracized by their families and might even be killed for shaming their families. Beside this, 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 expatriate Christians. Expatriate Christians also face discrimination or mistreatment by their fellow Muslim expatriates.

Drivers of Dictatorial paranoia:

The UAE government does not allow criticism, especially not from (foreign) Christians. As Freedom House reported: "[...] the domestic media environment is tightly controlled. Nearly all

¹⁵ Constitution of the United Arab Emirates, https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/United_Arab_Emirates_2004.pdf, last accessed on 12 December 2017.

media outlets serving Emirati audiences are either owned or heavily influenced by the authorities. Individuals who use internet-based platforms to publicize dissenting views or sensitive information have for years been subjected to arbitrary and extralegal detention or criminal prosecution with little due process.”¹⁶ In this environment, Christians always have to operate carefully.

Context

(For a more detailed overview, please see the Keys to Understanding section above.)

The UAE consists of seven emirates which have their own rulers and which were united in a federal state in the early 1970s. All emirates have a seat in the Federal Supreme Council – the highest constitutional, executive and legislative authority. UAE is not a democracy and the rulers exert pressure on society, allowing no 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 religion, press, assembly, association and expression are severely restricted in the kingdom.

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 the 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 in the world’s fourth richest state per capita.

While the UAE had depended predominantly on the fishing and pearl industry in the past, this changed after oil was found in the 1950s and first exported from Abu Dhabi in the early 1960s. Today the UAE holds the world’s sixth-largest oil reserves and this has brought a lot of immigrants to the country where only 15% of the population are national citizens. The UAE have developed and implemented structural diversification strategies to avoid too much dependence on oil.

Other religious groups

The government allows other non-Christian groups like Hindus, Buddhists and Jews to practice their faith in private. They are allowed to gather in designated places or in private facilities. However, government scrutiny applies. For example, conference organizers need to register their events, even disclosing speakers and topics.¹⁷

Christian communities and how they are affected

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

¹⁶ <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-press/2017/united-arab-emirates>, last accessed on 12 December 2017.

¹⁷ United Arab Emirates, 2016 International Religious Freedom Report, p. 8.

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.

Communities of converts to Christianity

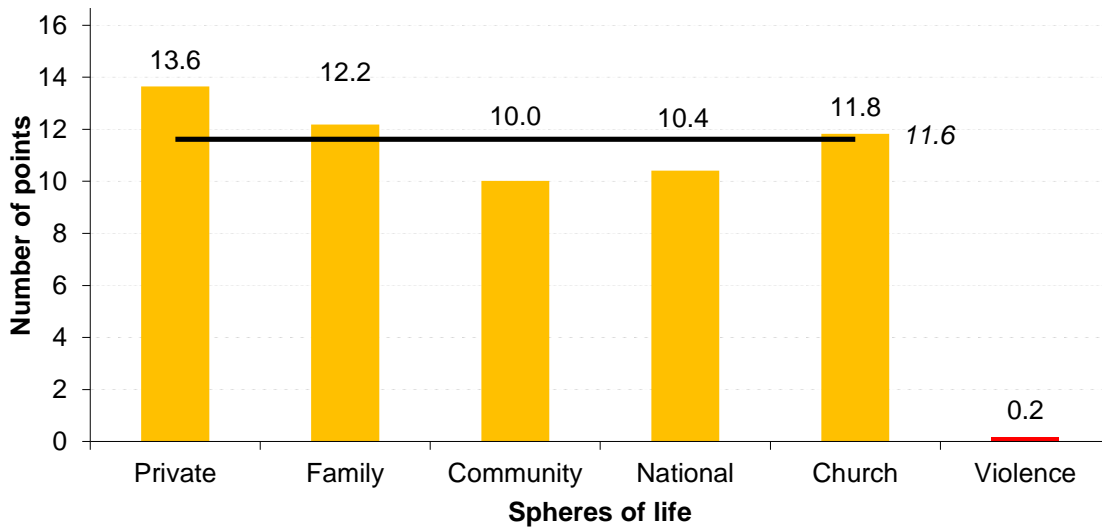
This group, consisting of converts from Islam to Christianity, is the most vulnerable group in the country. Converts are under severe pressure from relatives, family and Muslim society due to the Islamic government, law, and culture.

Non-traditional Christian communities:

There are no non-traditional Christian communities in UAE.

Pressure in the 5 spheres of life and violence

WWL 2018 Persecution Pattern for United Arab Emirates



(The maximum score for each block is 16.7)

The WWL 2018 Persecution pattern for the United Arab Emirates shows:

- The average pressure on Christians in the United Arab Emirates remains very high, rising from 11.1 in WWL 2017 to 11.6. This rise is due to the refinement in WWL analysis concerning the situation of converts from Islam to Christianity in the United Arab Emirates.
- Pressure is strongest in the *Private* and *Family spheres*, underlining the difficult situation of converts in the UAE. This is typical for countries where family (both nuclear

and extended) and the surrounding community play a significant role in the persecution of converts. Expatriate Christians are relatively free to worship – indicated by the lower score for the other *Spheres of life* - although church life remains highly restricted.

- The score for violence rose from 0.0 in WWL 2017 to 0.2, as some violence was reported.

Private sphere:

The pressure on Christians – particularly converts - is strongest in this *sphere of life*. Conversion from Islam to any other religion is prohibited. Due to the serious social discrimination and stigma against Christians, openly possessing Christian materials is dangerous especially for Muslims who might be converting or who have already converted but have not risked being identified as Christian for safety reasons.

Family sphere:

Pressure in this *sphere of life* is also strong and can be seen particularly concerning such issues as 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 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:

For Christians in the UAE, community life is not easy. In a society which is very conservative, being Christian is seen as a sign of impurity. The community ostracizes any converts or suspected converts. A country researcher states: "There are no specific laws or active practices prohibiting Christians from participating in communal or other similar institutions. However, Christians frequently exercise self-restraint for safety reasons. As a result, due to the already existing societal abuse and discrimination, Christians and other non-Muslims don't feel safe to engage freely in communal institutions and forums."

National sphere:

In UAE, Islam is the state religion and Sharia law is the principal source of legislation. Courts also use legislation based on Islamic law. Christians thus have to live their lives in a manner that is defined by others – e.g. they are required not to eat and drink in public during the Ramadan month. Christians are also not permitted to proselytize while Muslims are encouraged to do so. In general, (social) media are in favor of Islam and are biased against Christians.

Church sphere:

As there are a significant number of (expatriate) Christians in the country, there are more than two dozen official churches. Expatriate Christians face some problems in this sphere of life. The number of the existing churches is not enough for the significant number of Christians in the country. Secondly, the government does not allow congregations to worship, preach or pray in public. Furthermore, the Emirati society is conservative, forcing churches to exercise self-

restraint in their public expressions of faith. 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.

As there is no space at all for converts from Islam to Christianity in UAE society, there are no congregations of converts. Expatriate churches have to be careful with accepting converts into their congregations.

Violence:

When considering the small amount of violence against Christians, the UAE is a typical Gulf country. The government does not have to act against Christians as the pressure from society is very high and Christians are obedient. It is not easy to get verified reports about violence out of the country. However, Open Doors is aware of the difficult situation of low-skilled expatriate workers. According to Amnesty International, they “continued to face exploitation and abuse”.¹⁸ Back in October 2015, the BBC reported upon one tragic example of domestic worker abuse¹⁹ and Open Doors fears that Christian workers, especially women, are even more vulnerable because of their faith. However, there are currently no clear indications of persecution-related mistreatment of Christian expatriate workers. More research into this subject will be conducted in the near future.

Gender profile of persecution

Female:

Christian women remain especially vulnerable, as women in general in the UAE are treated as being inferior to men. Amnesty International has also reported that some laws improving the rights of foreign workers explicitly excluded domestic staff, many of whom are Christian women.²⁰

Male:

Men in particular face discrimination on the work floor. According to one country researcher: “Most of the time, men and boys are breadwinners and therefore they have to face the brunt of discrimination to help their families.”

Future outlook

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 interested or involved in politics – the elections for the legislative institution

¹⁸ Amnesty International Report 2016/17, p. 381.

¹⁹ <http://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-34616879>, last accessed on 7 December 2017.

²⁰ Amnesty International, Annual Report 2016/17, p. 381.

FNC in 2006 and 2011 saw low turnouts especially in the largest and richest emirates. A generous distribution of wealth seems to appease the population at the moment, though the historically poorer northern states with their demand for political change do pose a certain risk.

Emirate-wide, a significant youth population combined with a process of globalization (which loosens the state's monopoly over information) and a high unemployment rate do imply that the UAE should start to take the call for more democracy seriously.

Externally, the UAE joined Saudi Arabia in its boycott of Qatar in June 2017. The Qatari crisis only seems to be affecting Qatar seriously at the moment, but the ongoing tension might also affect the Emirates in the long term because the high dependency on trade requires an open and non-hostile environment.

Policy considerations

Open Doors recommends:

- The international community should support the UAE and other Gulf countries in efforts to tackle intolerance and radicalism, and ensure that new policies actively protect people of all religions.
- The government of UAE should be requested to give the necessary protection to domestic workers from South East Asia and Africa, many of whom are Christians.
- The government should actively stop all kinds of discrimination that Christians face in the country, thereby ensuring equal civil and legal rights for residents from all religions and ethnicities.
- The government should actively stop all kinds of pressure on Christians to convert to Islam. Any religious conversion should be of one's own volition.
- The international community should urge the government to ensure the protection of religious minorities in the country.
- The government should remove the restrictions it imposes on Christian fellowship and on the construction of places for worship.
- The government should remove any restrictions on the citizen's right to change his/her religion.

WWR in-depth reports

There are currently no in-depth reports on UAE available at:
<http://opendoorsanalytical.org/reports/> (password: freedom).

Open Doors article(s) from the region

There are currently no Open Doors articles on the United Arab Emirates available at: <http://opendoorsanalytical.org/articles/> (password freedom).

World Watch Monitor news articles

There are currently no recent WWM news articles on Djibouti. Any new articles will be made 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).

- [Gulf: Easter celebrations as difficult as ever](#)

26 April 2018

In the Gulf region, official Easter celebrations were held in Dubai, United Arab Emirates (as reported by the Khaleej Times on 1 April 2018) and in Kuwait City.

[Return to top of document](#)