

World Watch Research

United Arab Emirates: Background Information

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Serving persecuted **Christians** worldwide

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Copyright and sources

World Watch Research has divided up the previously named Full Country Dossier into two separate documents:

- Background country information (published annually in summer)
- Persecution dynamics (published annually in January).

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Map of country



United Arab Emirates: Population (UN estimate for 2024)	Christians	Chr%
9,592,000	1,241,000	12.9

Zurlo G A and Johnson T M, eds., *World Christian Database*, Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed May 2024

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 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 Mohammed bin Zayed al-Nahyan is the ruler of Abu Dhabi and the de facto ruler of the UAE. The northern states are poorer, for instance Umm Al Quwain, which is also more conservative (in terms of Islam). All emirates have a seat in the 'Federal Supreme Council' – the highest constitutional, executive and legislative authority.

President Mohammed bin Zayed al-Nahyan (commonly known as 'MBZ') took office in May 2022, following the death of his half-brother and former President Sheikh Khalifa Bin Zayed Al Nahyan. However, MBZ had already de facto ruled the UAE since his half-brother suffered a stroke in 2014. Hence, the smooth transition of power came as no surprise ([Haaretz, 13 May 2022](#)).

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 on tribal loyalty and not 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 reported threats to the stability of the country.

Internationally, the UAE is taking on its own more independent role, not always aligned anymore with ally and regional power Saudi Arabia. The UAE's main international objective, aside from regional influence, is focused on curbing political Islam, in particular the Muslim Brotherhood, which the government views as a threat to regional stability and its own power ([SWP, 8 July 2020](#)). Hence, the UAE sided with Saudi Arabia during the Qatar crisis of 2017-2020 ([BBC News, 19 July 2017](#)). Initially it also joined Saudi Arabia in its costly Yemen war, but later supported its own rebel group, further fragmenting the country ([BBC News, 19 June 2020](#)). Eventually withdrawing most of its armed forces in 2021, the UAE kept control of the two strategic islands of Mayun and Socotra - in a bid to control both the Gulf of Aden as well as the gateway to the Red Sea ([Brookings, 28 May 2021](#)). Furthermore, economic rivalry has also begun to create cracks in the relationship with Saudi Arabia, although relations remain strong nevertheless ([Reuters, 6 July 2021](#)). In January 2022, the UAE's ongoing involvement in Yemen became clear after a Houthi rebel group launched a drone attack against the country, hitting Abu Dhabi airport and an oil depot and killing three expatriate workers ([The Guardian, 17 January 2022](#)).

Since the fall of Libyan dictator Muammar Gaddafi, the UAE has also been involved in Libya and is known to be one of the supporters of Field Marshall Haftar's Libyan National Army, the opponent of the Turkey-backed Islamist groups in Libya. In a UN investigation, the UAE was suspected of launching a jet fighter missile attack on a migrant detention center in Libya in July 2019 ([BBC News, 6 November 2019](#)). However, following Haftar's failure to capture Tripoli (which would most likely have given him full control over Libya), the UAE changed its approach and officially pledged support to Libya's new unity government in 2021 ([The Arab Weekly, 8 April 2021](#)). At the same time, it forged ties with key militia leaders who control large parts of Tripoli and secured the appointment of an ally as head of the National Oil Corporation, hence increasing its influence in western Libya ([Al-Monitor, 28 January 2023](#)). Because of its new ties, the UAE did not support a rival Eastern government linked to Haftar ([Atlantic Council, 27 October 2022](#)). However, alliances may change, depending on which person or group serves the country's interests best. In 2022, some commentators even saw a role for the UAE in finding a final political solution for the crisis in Libya, following growing ties between the UAE and Turkey, the main backer of the Islamist groups in Libya ([Washington Institute, 14 March 2022](#)). However, in 2024, it now seems that the UAE is aiming to expand its regional influence and economic interests without siding with any particular party in the conflict ([TRT World, 4 March 2024](#)).

Although not in line with the traditional Arab stance on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, in September 2020 the UAE joined the Abraham Accords, normalizing ties with Israel. This move fits in with the UAE's aim to become less oil-dependent and to improve access to one of the Middle East's biggest economies and most highly technologically advanced countries. The deal, brokered by the US administration, also includes access to high-tech US military equipment, including the F-35 fighter jet ([BBC News, 15 September 2020](#)). Hence, although words of diplomatic friendship have been exchanged with Tehran and ambassadors were reinstated in 2022 and 2023, the Accords allow the UAE to have a stronger position than before for standing up to Iran (both in economic and military terms), the other regional power with whom relations are most often strained ([AGSIW, 26 February 2021](#); [Clingendael, 5 March 2024](#)). An example of such strain was the interruption of UAE TV channel in February 2024 by an Iran-linked hackers group which succeeded in broadcasting a deepfake video on the Israel-Hamas war ([The Guardian, 8 February 2024](#)).

Since the signing of the Abraham Accords, the economic relationship between the UAE and Israel has grown quickly across a broad range of sectors. However, after the outbreak of the Israel-Hamas war in October 2023, earlier predictions that continuing support for Israel could harm its reputation among the Arab states have taken on new depth of significance ([Chatham House, 28 March 2023](#)). For this reason, the UAE government is walking a thin line, separating trade from politics and emphasizing the medical assistance it could offer to Gaza, including a field hospital ([Reuters, 10 October 2023](#); [NDTV, 12 February 2024](#)). However, the majority of Emiratis already opposed normalization with Israel before the outbreak of the war and the war's continuation is making it a potential issue for discontent between government and citizens ([Washington Institute, 15 July 2022](#)). Hence, although the UAE remains committed to the Abraham Accords, it will have to remain careful in its approach, also to avoid domestic unrest ([Geopolitical Monitor, 15 November 2023](#)). Meanwhile, in 2024, the UAE has continued to establish ties with a wide range of geopolitical powers, without siding with any of them. Visits to various countries were made for the purpose of signing trade deals; countries included China, South Korea, Italy, Turkey and Russia ([Al-Monitor, UAE overview, accessed 2 August 2024](#)). Concerning Iran, see also below: *Security situation*.

The presence of Christians in the UAE in recent times started with the Arabian Mission and the opening of hospitals in 1951 and 1964, with the Oasis hospital still functioning today. Following the discovery of oil in the 1950s, strong population growth since the 1970s saw thousands of Christian expatriates coming to the country for employment, with WCD estimates showing that over one million Christians are resident in the country today. As a result of the crisis surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic, thousands of expatriates lost employment and had to leave the country, including many Christians. Despite plans to nationalize the workforce, is it likely that a sizable expatriate Christian community will remain in place for the foreseeable future.

Political and legal landscape

The Economist Intelligence Unit classifies the UAE government as 'authoritarian' in its Democracy Index 2023 ([EIU 2023 UAE summary](#)). 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 practice all political decisions rest particularly with Abu Dhabi's ruler and UAE president, Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed al-Nahyan (commonly known as "MBZ"), and Dubai's ruler, Vice-president and Prime Minister Sheikh

Mohammed bin Rashid al-Maktoum. In March 2023, the president named his eldest son as Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi, who in time will likely succeed him as president of the UAE.

Humanist International's [Freedom of Thought Report](#) (updated 18 March 2024) categorizes the government and Constitution as committing violations against human rights and religious freedom and writes:

- "The Constitution designates Islam as the official religion, and Sharia as the main source of legislation.. 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 UAE profile](#), accessed 29 August 2024) 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, color 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 2024 UAE](#)) shows that the Human Rights and State Legitimacy indicator remain quite high despite some improvement 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's Freedom in the World Index 2024](#), which rated the country as "not free". Reporters Without Borders ([RSF World Press Freedom Index 2024 UAE](#)) lists many instances where the freedom of the press and expression were curtailed and critics faced prosecution (for more details, see below: *Technological landscape*).

Gender perspective

Despite having ratified the CEDAW convention in 2004, the UAE has one of the most discriminatory legal systems towards women in the world ([GIWPS UAE profile](#), accessed 29 August 2024). In particular, marriage is a place where violent repression of women takes place. Women cannot marry without the authorization of their male guardian, and whereas men can unilaterally divorce their wives, women must apply through the courts ([HRW 2023 UAE country chapter](#)). Representing a positive development, the UAE introduced a series of legal reforms in November 2020, which included tougher

punishments for the killing of women by their families; previously the law had allowed judges to be lenient in cases where the woman was perceived to have brought dishonor on the family ([BBC News, 7 November 2020](#)). Despite recent improvements, legislation remains insufficient in relation to domestic violence, and marital rape is not directly addressed in law.

Religious landscape

United Arab Emirates: Religious context	Number of adherents	%
Christians	1,241,000	12.9
Muslim	7,144,000	74.5
Hindu	592,000	6.2
Buddhist	307,000	3.2
Ethnic religionist	0	0.0
Jewish	0	0.0
Bahai	46,800	0.5
Atheist	14,600	0.2
Agnostic	127,000	1.3
Other	119,000	1.2
<i>OTHER includes Chinese folk, New religionist, Sikh, Spiritist, Taoist, Confucianist, Jain, Shintoist, Zoroastrian.</i>		

Zurlo G A and Johnson T M, eds., World Christian Database, Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed May 2024

According to WCD 2024 estimates, 74.5% of the residents in UAE are Muslim. Of these, approximately 15% are Shiite. These numbers include the expatriate community. Christians make up the second largest religious group in the country (12.9%), followed by the Hindus (6.2%) and Buddhist (3.2%).

Like all 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. Proselytizing any other faith than Islam is prohibited, but non-Muslim groups can worship in dedicated buildings or private homes.

There is relative freedom for expatriate Christians to practice their faith as long as they refrain from evangelizing activities. In recent years, a small number of Christians have been detained and expelled from the country after accusations of proselytizing activities ([Middle East Concern UAE profile, accessed 29 August 2024](#)). Churches are typically overcrowded, with recognized churches often functioning as umbrella organizations for many other denominations. Receiving permission to build

new churches remains difficult. Despite such difficulties, expatriate church communities are generally thriving in the UAE, with the churches providing a welcome for Christians often far from home.

Female converts from a Muslim background are not legally permitted to marry non-Muslim men, unlike Muslim men who are permitted to marry non-Muslim women. This has the potential to restrict the growth of the Church.

Economic landscape

According to the [World Factbook UAE](#) (accessed 29 August 2024):

- **GDP per capita (PPP):** \$75,600 (2023 est.)
- **Unemployment:** 2.71% (2023 est.), with youth unemployment being 10.7%.
- **Inflation rate (consumer prices):** 4.83%
- **Percentage of population below national poverty line:** No data available, but probably very low among Emirati citizens since the government is known to take good care of nationals.

According to the [World Bank's Macro Poverty Outlook UAE \(April 2024\)](#):

- **General situation:** "The UAE maintains its status as a key regional hub for trade, finance, and tourism, bolstered by substantial progresses in economic diversification and a reduced dependence on hydrocarbon income."
- **Economic growth:** "The UAE economy experienced a significant slowdown to 3.1 percent in GDP growth in 2023, down from 7.9 percent in 2022. The deceleration was attributed to weaker economic global activities and a decline in oil production to comply with OPEC+ decisions."
- **Inflation:** "Inflation pressures eased in 2023 due to lower food prices, offsetting higher housing costs, with public wage growth remaining moderate throughout the year."
- **Economic outlook:** "Real GDP growth is projected to accelerate to 3.9 percent in 2024, fueled by OPEC+'s announced significant oil production hike in the second half of 2024 and a recovery in global economic activity."
- **Potential risks:** "Growth prospects are tempered by substantial risks, notably, from potential additional decisions by OPEC+ to delay increases in production, and other members decisions on production, in addition to the adverse impact of the conflict in the Middle East on UAE's economy."

Other sources report:

- The World Bank's [World by Income and Region report](#) (accessed 26 July 2024) puts the Emirati economy in the high income category.
- The Fragile State Index ([FSI 2024 UAE](#)) shows recovery in the economic indicators. Especially the "Economy" and "Human Flight and Brain Drain" indicators remained low.
- The Economist Intelligence Unit ([EIU 2023 UAE summary](#)) writes: "The UAE will be politically stable throughout the 2024-28 forecast period. The Abu Dhabi ruler, Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed al-Nahyan, will maintain policy stability following the smooth transfer of power in May 2022, when he became president; he cemented his position by appointing his son as the crown prince of Abu Dhabi in early 2023. Key appointments and foreign policy will be guided by commercial ambitions, strengthening of ties with established partners and building on newer

markets, especially in Asia and Africa, as well as by security concerns about Iran and Islamist militancy, which have risen with the outbreak of the Israel-Hamas conflict, and by a reduced US presence regionally. Economic growth will slow, but high international oil prices and incremental rises in output will bolster government resources, and supportive economic policies, including encouragement of foreign investment, will bolster non-oil economic expansion. Diversifying and strengthening the business environment will be prioritised, but hydrocarbons will remain central to the economy."

The UAE holds the world's sixth-largest oil reserves and this has encouraged a high level of immigration - only approximately 11% of the population are national citizens. The UAE have developed and implemented structural diversification strategies to avoid too much dependence on oil, but oil will remain central to the economy.

Around 90% of the Emirati population is working in the public sector ([The Economist, 7 October 2021](#)). Often employed on comfortable terms, the Emirati workforce is currently unwilling to make the necessary economic transition to private sector employment. As the BTI 2022 UAE report stated (p.23): "National unemployment does exist but this is the result of citizens preferring public sector employment over the more competitive private sector rather than insufficient employment opportunities." However, the government announced that by 2026 10% of personnel of all larger private companies needs to be Emirati ([PWC, 3 July 2022](#)), while smaller businesses will need to employ at least one Emirati by 2024 and two by the end of 2025 ([The National News, 11 July 2023](#)). In general, the Emirati rulers buy off any dissent by providing generous economic subsidies for all Emirati citizens. However, if austerity measures would become a necessity, the authorities might have to heed calls for political reforms in order to avoid unrest.

According to the [2024 Index of Economic Freedom](#), the country's economy ranked as the 22nd most free in the world and topped the list for the Middle East and North Africa. The report states: "Economic development has been underpinned by efforts to strengthen the business climate, boost investment, and cultivate a more vibrant private sector. The generally open trade regime sustains momentum for growth. The modern financial sector is competitive. No minimum capital is required to establish a business, and licensing has been streamlined. Employment regulations are relatively flexible, and the non-salary cost of employing a worker is moderate. Monetary stability has been maintained with inflationary pressure under control."

An important event was the Expo 2020 which was hosted by Dubai in the period 1 October 2021 - 31 March 2022, having been earlier postponed due to COVID-19 measures. This "[mega international event](#)" was another economic opportunity for the country to boost its international image (Gulf News, 11 December 2019).

Thousands of expatriate Christians have found employment in the United Arab Emirates. Christians are generally treated respectfully. However, labor abuses persist, especially for domestic workers who are excluded from the November 2021 labor law ([HRW 2023 UAE country chapter](#)). Combined with racism, this especially affects Christians from Asian and African countries working in low-paid jobs. (See below: *kafala* system in: *Social and cultural landscape*.)

Gender perspective

Women are among the most economically vulnerable in the UAE, as like most things, financial control typically falls to the responsibility of men. In some cases, men exploit the authority that the male guardianship system grants them to extort female dependents, typically by granting their consent for women to work or travel on condition that they pay the male guardian accordingly ([HRW, 16 July 2016](#)). Making it additionally challenging for women to gain financial stability, under Sharia rules of inheritance, sons and daughters do not have equal inheritance rights.

Social and cultural landscape

According to the [World Factbook UAE](#) (accessed 29 August 2024):

- **Main ethnic groups:** The majority of the Emirati population are from Arab decent, with Emirati's making up 11.6% of the population. A wide variety of ethnicities, including Indian (38%), Egyptian (10%), Bangladeshi (10%), Pakistani (9%), Filipino (6%) and many others can be found among the expatriate community.
- **Main languages:** The official language is Arabic, with English being widely spoken as well. Other languages include Hindi, Malayam, Urdu, Pashto, Tagalog and Persian.
- **Urban population:** In 2023, 87.8% of the population lived in urban areas, with the urbanization rate standing at 1,5%.
- **Fertility rate:** 1.6 children born per woman (2024 est.)
- **Literacy rate:** 98.1% of the population can read and write; with slightly more men (98.8%) than women (97.2%) being able to read and write (2021).
- **Education:** On average, Emiratis are expected to have 16 years of schooling. (17 years for girls/women, 15 years for boys/men)
- **Population/age:** Non-nationals make up 87.9% of the total population (2019 est.). The younger generation - up to 14 years of age - makes up 16.4% of the population.
- **Life expectancy:** 79.9 years on average; women (81.4 years), men (78.6 years) (2024 est.).

According to the [UNDP Human Development Report UAE](#) (updates as of 13 March 2024):

- **HDI score and ranking:** The UAE ranks #17 out 193 countries. The combined ratio of life expectancy, education and per capita income gives a very high score of 0.937 on the Human Development Index (HDI value for 2022).
- **Gender inequality:** With a GDI (Gender Development Index) score of 0.986 for 2022, women are slightly disadvantaged in comparison to men. The GDI measures the differences in life expectancy, years of education and GNI per capita per gender.

Although a unified Emirati identity has been encouraged over the last decades, tribal loyalties still play an important role and family ties are strong. Islamic norms remain dominant and the culture conservative, but modernization has become characteristic for the country as well. Nevertheless, the presence of thousands of migrant workers has caused Emiratis to keep to themselves and Emirati women often wear the niqab (a veil in which only the eyes are visible). Most migrants/expatriates live and work in their own foreign labor groups. Expatriate children often go to schools belonging to their own community group.

More than 85% of the country's population are expatriate migrant workers, which creates a dual system of rights and privileges in the country. With thousands of Asians and Africans flocking to the rich country, social and labor abuse is a high risk. Ethnic Arab Emiratis are at the top of the social ladder and look down upon those foreigners, especially the poor and low-skilled workers from South East Asia and Africa.

Human Rights Watch ([HRW 2024 country chapter](#)) writes:

- "The UAE's *kafala* (sponsorship) system ties migrant workers' visas to their employers, preventing them from changing or leaving employers without permission. Employers can falsely charge workers for 'absconding' even when escaping abuse, which puts them at risk of fines, arrest, detention, and deportation, all without any due process guarantees. Many low-paid migrant workers were acutely vulnerable to situations that amount to forced labor, including passport confiscation, wage theft, and illegal recruitment fees. ... The labor law allows workers to take on flexible, temporary, part-time, and remote work and also contains explicit language prohibiting sexual harassment and discrimination."
- A 2022 decree concerning domestic workers "now prohibits discrimination and violence against domestic workers by employers and imposes obligations on recruitment agencies to provide information to domestic workers, refrain from charging them with recruitment costs, and refrain from violence against domestic workers. However, it is still weaker than the labor law and falls short of international standards. Moreover, domestic workers continue to report being confined to homes or agency offices, wage theft, and verbal, physical, and sexual violence by employers and recruiters."

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: over 200 males per 100 females.

Although not primarily faith-related, it is very likely that many Christian expatriates experience (sexual) abuse, especially female domestic workers. The treatment of Christians in the UAE is not so much based on their faith, as on their skin color and ethnic background. Western (white) Christian expatriates are far less likely to experience harassment than African or Asian Christian expatriates. The latter can also face discrimination and mistreatment from their fellow Muslim expatriates. In addition, high-skilled workers will face less difficulties than low-skilled ones. Hence, a low-skilled Christian migrant from an African or Asian background will be most vulnerable in the UAE.

In general conversion from Islam to Christianity will be seen as betrayal by the Emiratis and is likely to lead to high levels of family and societal pressure, including ostracization and forced marriage, and can also lead to physical violence.

Technological landscape

According to [DataReportal Digital 2024: UAE](#) (23 February 2024) / Survey date - January 2024:

- **Internet usage:** 99.0% penetration
- **Social media usage:** 112% of the total population. As of January 2024, 39.6% of the UAE's social media users were female, while 60.4% were male.

- **Active cellular mobile connections:** 219.4% of the total population. The UAE is one of just a handful of countries where 100% of women report owning a mobile cellphone ([GIWPS UAE profile](#), accessed 29 August 2024).

According to Freedom House's [Freedom in the World Index 2024](#), which classifies the UAE as "not free" with a score of 18/100:

- "The 1980 Publications and Publishing Law regulates all aspects of the media and prohibits criticism of the government. Journalists commonly practice self-censorship, and outlets frequently publish government statements without criticism or comment. ... A number of well-known commentators have been jailed in recent years for criticizing the government, expressing support for dissidents or human rights, or calling for political reform. Leading human rights activist Ahmed Mansoor, who received a 10-year prison term in 2018 for using social media to "publish false information that damages the country's reputation," remained behind bars in 2023."

And according to Freedom House's [Freedom on the Net 2023 UAE](#):

- "Internet freedom in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) remains significantly restricted. Online censorship is rampant, and the online media environment lacks diversity. Government surveillance of online activists and journalists is pervasive and has forced internet users to extensively self-censor. Authorities and government supporters continue to use increasingly sophisticated technology to spread disinformation that advances pro-UAE domestic and international narratives on social media. During the coverage period, social media users were arrested or fined for their online posts."

Furthermore, Reporters without Borders ranks the UAE 160th out of 180 countries ([RSF World Press Freedom 2024 UAE](#)) and reports:

- "The government prevents both local and foreign independent media outlets from thriving by tracking down and persecuting dissenting voices. Expatriate Emirati journalists risk being harassed, arrested or extradited. ... As soon as they emit the slightest criticism, journalists and bloggers find themselves in the crosshairs of the UAE's authorities, who are masters of online surveillance. Offenders are usually accused of defamation, insulting the state or spreading false information designed to harm the country's image. For this, they risk long prison sentences and are likely to be mistreated."

According to the US State Department ([IRFR 2023 UAE](#)):

"The government of Abu Dhabi, stating that it was doing so as a security measure, installed closed circuit television cameras in houses of worship and other spaces used for prayer, as it has also done for most other large public facilities. Some churches reported paying for the cameras, and others reported not having access to camera feeds, saying they were monitored by security agencies."

The country's two primary internet service providers, both majority-owned by the government, continued to block certain websites critical of Islam or supportive of religious views the government considered extremist, including some Islamist sites. The service providers continued to block other

sites on religion-related topics, including ones with information on Christianity, atheism, and testimonies of former Muslims who converted to Christianity."

Like all residents of the UAE, Christians have to be careful what they communicate online. They can in general share expressions of faith as long as it is not critical of or contradicting Islamic beliefs.

Security situation

The UAE is an ally of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, having joined the Saudis in their [boycott of Qatar](#) between 2017 and 2020 (BBC News, 7 January 2021) and taking similar positions against political Islam in general and the Muslim Brotherhood in particular. For example, the UAE had been a supporter of General Haftar's Libyan National Army ([HRW, 1 November 2020](#)), although alliances have since changed (as stated above in *Recent history*). Initially, the UAE joined Saudi Arabia in its war against the Houthi rebels in Yemen. However, after some years both countries started supporting different groups in Yemen and in 2019 the UAE decided to withdraw most of its troops. Despite this, it continues to support its allied Yemeni groups and actively tries to expand its maritime interests ([Carnegie Middle East Center, 16 March 2023](#)).

The country is wary of Iran's regional influence and has allied itself with the USA, Saudi Arabia and Iran's archenemy Israel (following the Abraham Accords in 2020). However, recently, the country indicated its preference to generally improve all diplomatic relations rather than engage in stockpiling arms ([Le Monde, 18 July 2022](#)). In 2022, it returned its ambassador to Iran. The country is still in dispute with Iran over the islands of Abu Musa and the Lesser and Greater Tunbs, which have been occupied by Iran since 1971. Despite increasing diplomatic efforts to mount pressure on Iran, it is unlikely that the tension will escalate into any form of military action ([Responsible Statecraft, 4 September 2023](#)).

Despite all military operations abroad, the risk of terror attacks inside the country is low, although the drone attacks by Houthi rebels based in Yemen in January 2022 were a cause for concern (see above: *Recent history*). The security services maintain high levels of surveillance and all borders are well protected. Because of the government's strict policies, crime levels are low. Most citizens enjoy high levels of wealth, while all non-citizens committing a crime will be immediately deported when caught or after serving their sentences.

Christians generally feel safe in the country and the risk of attacks by radical Islamic groups is low.

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. The cathedral was 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, not far from Abu Dhabi. The monastery was in use 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 (supposedly around 630 AD, if traditional Islamic sources are taken as being historically reliable). 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. A further [Christian monastery](#) has been discovered on Siniyah Island, part of the sand-dune sheikhdom of Umm al-Quwain (CBS News, 3 November 2022).

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. 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 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% are Christian. Most major church denominations have congregations and hold services in the UAE.

Church spectrum today

United Arab Emirates: Church networks	Christians	%
Orthodox	82,600	6.7
Catholic	1,098,000	88.5
Protestant	31,000	2.5
Independent	17,600	1.4
Unaffiliated	31,000	2.5
Doubly-affiliated Christians	-19,800	-1.6
Total	1,240,400	100.0
<i>(Any deviation from the total number of Christians stated above is due to the rounding of decimals)</i>		
Evangelical movement	15,300	1.2
Pentecostal-Charismatic	279,000	22.5

Zurlo G A and Johnson T M, eds., *World Christian Database*, Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed May 2024

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:** Christians 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. **Pentecostal-Charismatic:** Church members involved in renewal in the Holy Spirit, sometimes known collectively as "Renewalists".

There are approximately 40 church buildings in the country and some of the main recognized churches have more than fifty different church groups under their wings. However, the number of church groups operating outside the recognized church buildings in the Emirate of Dubai alone 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.

As mentioned by the US State Department ([IRFR 2023](#)): "According to local observers, Abu Dhabi Police directed private security personnel at several camps for laborers to surveil gatherings of laborers and report if they discussed security, social, and religion-related concerns."

Further useful reports

A selection of in-depth reports and smaller articles are available on the Research & Reports pages of the Open Doors website: <https://www.opendoors.org/en-US/research-reports/>.

These are also available on the Open Doors Analytical website (password: freedom):

- <https://opendoorsanalytical.org/?s=United Arab Emirates>
- <https://opendoorsanalytical.org/reports/>.

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