

World  
Watch  
Research

United Arab Emirates:  
Full Country Dossier  
March 2024



**OpenDoors**

Serving persecuted **Christians** worldwide

Open Doors International / World Watch Research

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[research@od.org](mailto:research@od.org)

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# Introduction

## World Watch List 2024

Rank	Country	Private life	Family life	Community life	National life	Church life	Violence	Total Score WWL 2024	Total Score WWL 2023	Total Score WWL 2022	Total Score WWL 2021	Total Score WWL 2020
1	North Korea	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	12.8	96	98	96	94	94
2	Somalia	16.5	16.7	16.6	16.6	16.6	10.6	93	92	91	92	92
3	Libya	15.9	16.0	15.9	16.1	16.4	10.2	91	88	91	92	90
4	Eritrea	14.6	14.9	15.5	15.9	15.7	12.8	89	89	88	88	87
5	Yemen	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	5.9	89	89	88	87	85
6	Nigeria	13.5	13.9	14.5	14.9	14.4	16.7	88	88	87	85	80
7	Pakistan	13.2	13.9	15.0	15.1	13.1	16.7	87	86	87	88	88
8	Sudan	14.1	14.2	14.9	14.9	15.5	13.3	87	83	79	79	85
9	Iran	15.0	14.6	13.5	15.8	16.5	10.9	86	86	85	86	85
10	Afghanistan	15.7	15.9	15.2	16.3	16.6	4.6	84	84	98	94	93
11	India	12.2	12.6	13.3	14.8	13.2	16.5	83	82	82	83	83
12	Syria	13.4	14.3	13.9	14.3	14.2	11.1	81	80	78	81	82
13	Saudi Arabia	15.2	15.3	14.8	15.7	16.6	3.3	81	80	81	78	79
14	Mali	11.1	10.1	14.7	12.8	15.1	15.6	79	76	70	67	66
15	Algeria	14.4	14.1	11.5	14.0	15.6	9.8	79	73	71	70	73
16	Iraq	14.2	14.4	14.0	14.8	13.9	7.8	79	76	78	82	76
17	Myanmar	12.2	10.6	13.4	13.7	13.0	16.1	79	80	79	74	73
18	Maldives	15.6	15.5	13.6	16.0	16.4	0.9	78	77	77	77	78
19	China	13.0	10.0	12.8	14.6	16.0	11.1	78	77	76	74	70
20	Burkina Faso	11.7	9.7	13.2	11.5	13.8	15.6	75	71	68	67	66
21	Laos	11.6	10.6	13.2	14.3	14.0	11.3	75	68	69	71	72
22	Cuba	13.2	8.7	13.8	13.3	15.1	8.7	73	70	66	62	52
23	Mauritania	14.6	14.2	13.8	14.2	14.2	1.3	72	72	70	71	68
24	Morocco	13.2	13.8	11.7	12.8	14.4	5.4	71	69	69	67	66
25	Uzbekistan	14.6	12.7	13.9	12.6	15.5	1.7	71	71	71	71	73
26	Bangladesh	12.4	10.6	12.5	10.8	10.4	14.1	71	69	68	67	63
27	Niger	9.4	9.6	14.5	7.7	13.1	15.9	70	70	68	62	60
28	CAR	10.3	8.6	13.9	9.6	12.2	15.6	70	70	68	66	68
29	Turkmenistan	14.2	12.3	13.6	13.9	15.5	0.6	70	70	69	70	70
30	Nicaragua	12.1	7.6	13.2	13.2	14.1	9.6	70	65	56	51	41
31	Oman	14.3	14.0	10.6	13.3	14.0	3.1	69	65	66	63	62
32	Ethiopia	9.9	9.7	12.6	10.4	12.1	14.4	69	66	66	65	63
33	Tunisia	12.3	13.2	10.2	12.4	13.8	6.9	69	67	66	67	64
34	Colombia	11.1	8.6	12.9	11.3	10.4	14.1	68	71	68	67	62
35	Vietnam	11.3	9.4	12.4	13.8	14.2	7.2	68	70	71	72	72
36	Bhutan	13.1	12.1	12.4	14.1	14.3	2.2	68	66	67	64	61
37	Mexico	11.5	8.5	12.5	11.1	10.6	14.1	68	67	65	64	60
38	Egypt	12.5	13.7	11.4	11.9	10.9	7.8	68	68	71	75	76
39	Mozambique	9.3	8.5	13.9	8.4	12.5	15.0	68	68	65	63	43
40	Qatar	14.2	14.2	10.5	13.2	14.4	0.6	67	68	74	67	66
41	DRC	8.0	7.9	12.6	9.7	13.0	15.9	67	67	66	64	56
42	Indonesia	10.9	12.3	11.5	10.2	9.7	11.5	66	68	68	63	60
43	Cameroon	8.8	7.6	12.6	8.0	13.1	15.9	66	65	65	64	60
44	Brunei	15.0	14.7	10.0	10.8	14.1	1.3	66	65	64	64	63
45	Comoros	12.7	14.0	11.2	12.4	14.2	1.1	66	66	63	62	57
46	Tajikistan	13.8	12.6	12.3	12.9	13.4	0.6	66	66	65	66	65
47	Kazakhstan	13.3	11.8	12.1	12.8	14.3	1.1	65	65	64	64	64
48	Jordan	12.9	14.2	10.5	12.4	12.8	2.2	65	65	66	64	64
49	Malaysia	13.0	14.1	11.5	12.2	11.1	2.4	64	66	63	63	62
50	Turkey	13.0	11.5	11.6	13.2	11.4	3.1	64	66	65	69	63

Rank	Country	Private life	Family life	Community life	National life	Church life	Violence	Total Score WWL 2024	Total Score WWL 2023	Total Score WWL 2022	Total Score WWL 2021	Total Score WWL 2020
51	Kenya	10.3	9.2	11.4	8.0	11.5	12.4	63	64	63	62	61
52	Tanzania	9.3	10.8	10.3	8.6	8.7	14.4	62	63	61	58	55
53	Nepal	12.1	10.4	9.5	13.2	12.3	4.4	62	61	64	66	64
54	Kuwait	13.1	13.6	9.4	12.0	12.2	0.9	61	64	64	63	62
55	Djibouti	12.3	12.6	12.7	10.1	12.3	1.1	61	60	59	56	56
56	Chad	11.6	8.2	10.2	10.2	10.3	10.6	61	58	55	53	56
57	UAE	13.3	13.4	9.5	11.3	12.8	0.7	61	62	62	62	60
58	Sri Lanka	12.9	9.2	10.8	11.5	9.7	5.9	60	57	63	62	65
59	Azerbaijan	13.2	9.9	9.6	11.9	13.6	1.7	60	59	60	56	57
60	Palestinian Territories	13.1	13.3	9.7	10.7	12.1	0.9	60	60	59	58	60
61	Kyrgyzstan	13.2	10.3	11.3	10.5	12.2	1.3	59	59	58	58	57
62	Russian Federation	12.7	7.7	10.6	12.8	12.9	1.7	58	57	56	57	60
63	Rwanda	9.4	7.7	9.0	10.4	11.7	9.4	58	57	50	42	42
64	Burundi	7.6	7.8	9.4	9.8	9.7	12.8	57	55	52	48	48
65	Bahrain	12.0	13.2	8.6	11.3	8.5	1.1	55	55	57	56	55
66	Honduras	7.9	4.7	12.2	7.3	9.9	12.6	55	53	48	46	39
67	Venezuela	6.0	4.4	11.1	10.0	10.8	10.7	53	56	51	39	42
68	Togo	9.2	6.7	9.3	7.1	11.0	8.9	52	49	44	43	41
69	Guinea	10.3	7.5	8.3	8.3	10.5	7.2	52	48	43	47	45
70	Uganda	8.1	5.0	7.4	6.7	8.8	15.9	52	51	48	47	48
71	Angola	6.8	6.7	8.1	11.5	11.4	7.2	52	52	51	46	43
72	Lebanon	11.0	10.2	7.0	6.1	6.6	7.2	48	40	35	34	35
73	Gambia	8.3	8.2	8.9	8.8	8.9	3.7	47	44	44	43	43
74	South Sudan	5.7	4.4	7.0	6.3	7.6	15.6	46	46	43	43	44
75	Belarus	9.6	3.8	5.8	9.7	13.3	3.3	46	43	33	30	28
76	Ivory Coast	12.0	6.5	8.7	5.9	8.0	3.3	44	44	42	42	42
77	Ukraine	5.5	4.8	8.0	11.6	11.6	2.8	44	37	37	34	33
78	Israel	9.8	8.6	5.8	6.3	6.9	6.7	44	38	41	40	38

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## 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).
- Highlighted links in the text can be found written out in full at the conclusion of each main section under the heading “External links”. In order to reduce the length of these reference sections, a table containing links to regularly used sources can be found at the beginning of the “Keys to Understanding” chapter under the heading “Links for general background information”. Where one of these sources has been quoted in the dossier text, a quote reference is supplied as indicated in the second column of the table.
- The WWL 2024 reporting period was 1 October 2022 - 30 September 2023.
- 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 can be found on the research pages of the Open Doors website: <https://www.opendoors.org/en-US/research-reports/wwl-documentation/> and on the Open Doors Analytical website (password: freedom): <https://opendoorsanalytical.org/world-watch-list-documentation/>.

# WWL 2024 Situation in brief / UAE

## Brief country details

UAE: Population (UN estimate for 2023)	Christians	Chr%
10,165,000	1,125,000	11.1

Data source: Todd M. Johnson and Gina A. Zurlo, eds., *World Christian Database* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed March 2023)

## Map of country



United Arab Emirates: World Watch List	Points	WWL Rank
WWL 2024	61	57
WWL 2023	62	54
WWL 2022	62	54
WWL 2021	62	53
WWL 2020	60	47

## Dominant persecution engines and drivers

United Arab Emirates:	
Main persecution engines	Main drivers
Islamic oppression	One's own (extended) family, Government officials, Citizens (people from the broader society), including mobs
Clan oppression	Citizens (people from the broader society), including mobs, One's own (extended) family
Dictatorial paranoia	Government officials

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

### Brief description of the persecution situation

Christian expatriates are free to worship in private or in the designated church compounds, 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 Emirati 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 levels of pressure 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 converts being killed or harmed for their faith.

### Specific examples of violations of rights in the reporting period

- Converts from Islam to Christianity, both Emirati nationals and foreign workers, continued 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 without pay. As a result, many seek asylum in another country.
- Christian migrant workers, especially those working as domestic staff in Emirati homes, remained vulnerable to abuse. Although not primarily faith-related, many Christian domestic migrant workers, almost all of whom are female, experience abuse.

### Specific examples of positive developments

- The UAE's hosting of Roman Catholic Pope Francis in February 2019 was a helpful step towards future tolerance of Christianity in the country. Although well outside the WWL 2024 reporting period, this visit has positively affected religious affairs since then. The Pope also [signed](#) a document on 'Human Fraternity' together with the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar, the most prestigious seat of Sunni Islamic learning (The Guardian, 4 February 2019).
- Following the visit of the Pope and the signing of the Document on Human Fraternity, a new interfaith complex has been built in Abu Dhabi ([Gulf News, 1 March 2023](#)). The 'Abrahamic Family House' consists of a mosque, a synagogue and a church ([For Human Fraternity, accessed 24 August 2023](#)).

- Since the visit of the Pope, a further new church building has been inaugurated. In December 2021, the Roman Catholic St. John the Baptist church was opened in Al Ruwais, in the southern Al-Dhafra region. The church was built on a plot of land in the Al-Ruwais residential complex donated by Abu Dhabi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Zayed ([Arab News, 16 December 2021](#)).
- In line with the Document on Human Fraternity and other activities, a Memorandum of Understanding was signed to make interfaith dialogue officially part of the COP28, the global climate conference which was held in Dubai in December 2023 ([Vatican News, 2 August 2023](#)). Subsequently, the first ever Faith pavilion was established with the formal involvement of the Vatican. The aim of the dialogue was to discuss how religious communities could be involved in the subject of 'climate change' ([COP28, 3 December 2023](#)).

## External Links - Situation in brief

- Specific examples of positive developments: signed - <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/feb/04/pope-and-grand-imam-sign-historic-pledge-of-fraternity-in-uae>
- Specific examples of positive developments: Gulf News, 1 March 2023 - <https://gulfnews.com/uae/abrahamic-family-house-what-to-know-as-the-complex-opens-to-all-visitors-offers-guided-tours-1.94167149>
- Specific examples of positive developments: For Human Fraternity, accessed 24 August 2023 - <https://www.forhumanfraternity.org/abrahamic-family-house/>
- Specific examples of positive developments: Arab News, 16 December 2021 - <https://www.arabnews.com/node/1988146/middle-east>
- Specific examples of positive developments: Vatican News, 2 August 2023 - <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/world/news/2023-08/uae-and-committee-for-human-fraternity-sign-mou-ahead-of-cop28.html>
- Specific examples of positive developments: COP28, 3 December 2023 - <https://www.cop28.com/en/news/2023/12/World-religious-leaders-come-together-to-mark-inauguration>



# WWL 2024: Keys to understanding / UAE

## Links for general background information

Name	Quote Reference	Link	Last accessed on
Amnesty International 2022/23 UAE report	AI UAE 2022	<a href="https://www.amnesty.org/en/location/middle-east-and-north-africa/ united-arab-emirates/report-united-arab-emirates/">https://www.amnesty.org/en/location/middle-east-and-north-africa/ united-arab-emirates/report-united-arab-emirates/</a>	14 July 2023
BBC News UAE profile - updated 3 March 2023	BBC UAE profile	<a href="https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-14703998">https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-14703998</a>	14 July 2023
Bertelsmann Transformation Index UAE report 2022	BTI UAE Report 2022	<a href="https://bti-project.org/en/reports/country-report/ARE">https://bti-project.org/en/reports/country-report/ARE</a>	14 July 2023
CIA World Factbook UAE - updated 11 July 2023	World Factbook UAE	<a href="https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/united-arab-emirates/">https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/united-arab-emirates/</a>	14 July 2023
Crisis24 UAE report (Garda World)	Crisis24 UAE report	<a href="https://crisis24.garda.com/insights-intelligence/intelligence/country-reports/united-arab-emirates">https://crisis24.garda.com/insights-intelligence/intelligence/country-reports/united-arab-emirates</a>	14 July 2023
Economist Intelligence Unit UAE summary 2023	EIU UAE summary	<a href="http://country.eiu.com/united-arab-emirates">http://country.eiu.com/united-arab-emirates</a>	14 July 2023
FFP's Fragile States Index 2023 – covering 179 countries	FSI 2023 UAE	<a href="https://fragilestatesindex.org/country-data/">https://fragilestatesindex.org/country-data/</a>	14 July 2023
Freedom House's 2023 Democracy index – covering 29 countries, UAE not included	Democracy Index 2023	<a href="https://freedomhouse.org/countries/nations-transit/scores">https://freedomhouse.org/countries/nations-transit/scores</a>	
Freedom House's 2023 Global Freedom index – covering 210 countries	Global Freedom Index 2023 UAE	<a href="https://freedomhouse.org/country/united-arab-emirates/freedom-world/2023">https://freedomhouse.org/country/united-arab-emirates/freedom-world/2023</a>	14 July 2023
Freedom House's Freedom on the Net 2023 report – covering 70 countries	Freedom on the Net 2023 UAE	<a href="https://freedomhouse.org/country/united-arab-emirates/freedom-net/2023">https://freedomhouse.org/country/united-arab-emirates/freedom-net/2023</a>	18 March 2024
Georgetown's Women, Peace and Security Index 2021/2022 – covering 170 countries	GIWPS 2021 UAE profile	<a href="https://giwps.georgetown.edu/country/united-arab-emirates/">https://giwps.georgetown.edu/country/united-arab-emirates/</a>	14 July 2023
Girls Not Brides UAE report	Girls Not Brides UAE	<a href="https://www.girlsnotbrides.org/learning-resources/child-marriage-atlas/regions-and-countries/united-arab-emirates/">https://www.girlsnotbrides.org/learning-resources/child-marriage-atlas/regions-and-countries/united-arab-emirates/</a>	14 July 2023
Human Rights Watch World Report 2023 - UAE country chapter	HRW 2023 UAE country chapter	<a href="https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2023/country-chapters/united-arab-emirates">https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2023/country-chapters/united-arab-emirates</a>	14 July 2023
Internet World Stats available in 2023	IWS 2023 UAE	<a href="https://www.internetworldstats.com/middle.htm#ae">https://www.internetworldstats.com/middle.htm#ae</a>	14 July 2023
Middle East Concern – UAE – covering 24 countries	MEC UAE report	<a href="https://meconcern.org/countries/united-arab-emirates/">https://meconcern.org/countries/united-arab-emirates/</a>	18 March 2024
RSF's 2023 World Press Freedom Index – covering 180 countries	World Press Freedom 2023 UAE	<a href="https://rsf.org/en/united-arab-emirates">https://rsf.org/en/united-arab-emirates</a>	14 July 2023
Transparency International's 2023 Corruption Perceptions Index – covering 180 countries	CPI 2023 UAE	<a href="https://www.transparency.org/en/cpi/2023/index/are">https://www.transparency.org/en/cpi/2023/index/are</a>	18 March 2024
UNDP: Human Development Report UAE - data updates as of 13 March 2024	UNDP HDR UAE	<a href="https://hdr.undp.org/data-center/specific-country-data/#/countries/ARE">https://hdr.undp.org/data-center/specific-country-data/#/countries/ARE</a>	18 March 2024
US State Department's 2022 International Religious Freedom Report UAE	IRFR 2022 UAE	<a href="https://www.state.gov/reports/2022-report-on-international-religious-freedom/united-arab-emirates/">https://www.state.gov/reports/2022-report-on-international-religious-freedom/united-arab-emirates/</a>	14 July 2023
USCIRF 2023 covering 17 CPC / 11 SWL, UAE not included	USCIRF 2023	<a href="https://www.uscifr.gov/countries">https://www.uscifr.gov/countries</a>	
World Bank GCC overview – updated 25 October 2023	World Bank GCC report	<a href="https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/gcc">https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/gcc</a>	18 March 2024
World Bank Macro Poverty Outlook UAE - April 2023	Macro Poverty Outlook 2023 UAE	<a href="https://thedocs.worldbank.org/en/doc/65cf93926fdb3ea23b72f277fc249a72-0500042021/related/mpo-are.pdf">https://thedocs.worldbank.org/en/doc/65cf93926fdb3ea23b72f277fc249a72-0500042021/related/mpo-are.pdf</a>	14 July 2023
World Bank UAE data - 2021	World Bank UAE data	<a href="https://databank.worldbank.org/views/reports/reportwidget.aspx?Report_Name=CountryProfileId=b450fd57tbar-ydd-yinf-nzm=ncountry=ARE">https://databank.worldbank.org/views/reports/reportwidget.aspx?Report_Name=CountryProfileId=b450fd57tbar-ydd-yinf-nzm=ncountry=ARE</a>	14 July 2023

## 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](#)). Nonetheless, alliances may change, depending on which person or group serves the country's interests best. Some commentators even see a role for the UAE to find 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](#)). In 2024, it seems that the UAE is now 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 diplo-

matic 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 (both in economic and military terms) for standing up to Iran, 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](#)). 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, it is 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](#) (23 October 2020) categorizes the government and Constitution as committing 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 gener-

ally accepted traditions provided that such freedom ... does not violate the public (*Islamic*) morals'."

Middle East Concern (MEC UAE report) 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 2023 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 Global Freedom Index 2023, which rated the country as "not free". Reporters Without Borders (RSF World Press Freedom 2023) 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 2021 UAE profile). 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	1,125,000	11.1
Muslim	7,952,000	78.2
Hindu	635,000	6.2
Buddhist	195,000	1.9
Ethno-religionist	0	0.0
Jewish	0	0.0
Bahai	49,800	0.5
Atheist	15,600	0.2
Agnostic	115,000	1.1
Other	77,600	0.8
<i>OTHER includes Chinese folk, New religionist, Sikh, Spiritist, Taoist, Confucianist, Jain, Shintoist, Zoroastrian.</i>		

Data source: Todd M. Johnson and Gina A. Zurlo, eds., *World Christian Database* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed March 2023)

According to WCD 2023 estimates, 78.2% 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 (11.1%), followed by the Hindus (6.2%) and Buddhist (1.9%).

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 (MEC country report). Churches are typically overcrowded, with recognized churches often functioning as umbrella organizations for many other denominations. Receiving permission to build new churches remains difficult (see also below: *Pressure in the 5 spheres of life/Block 5 - Additional information*). Nonetheless, church communities are generally thriving in the UAE, with the churches providing a welcome community to expatriate 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 ([UAE Government Portal](#),

accessed 19 March 2024). This has the potential to restrict the growth of the Church.

## Economic landscape

According to the World Factbook UAE and World Bank UAE data:

- **GDP per capita (PPP):** \$69,700 (2021 est.)
- **Unemployment:** 3.4% (2021 est.), with youth unemployment being 10.7%.
- **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 2023 UAE:

- **General situation:** "UAE continues to be the region's trade, financial, and travel hub due to the progress made in economic diversification and reducing hydrocarbon dependency. However, the UAE will increasingly face greater regional competition for foreign investment, especially from Saudi Arabia and Qatar, as these countries adopt economic plans similar to Abu Dhabi's Economic and Environment Vision 2030 and Dubai's Industrial Strategy 2030."
- **Economic growth:** "Economic growth in 2023 is expected to slow compared to 2022 due to a decline in global economic activity, stagnant oil production, and tightening financial conditions. Real GDP is projected to grow by 3.6 percent in 2023 before moderating slightly over the forecast period. The non-oil sector is anticipated to grow by 4.2 percent in 2023, supported by strong domestic demand; particularly in the tourism, real estate, construction, transportation, and manufacturing sectors."
- **Potential risks:** "Key risks to the outlook include a breakout of new COVID-19 variants, tighter global financial conditions, volatile oil prices, and external uncertainties."

Other sources report:

- The World Bank's [World by Income and Region report](#) (accessed 31 August 2023) puts the Emirati economy in the high income category.
- The Fragile State Index (FSI 2023 UAE) shows recovery in the economic indicators on average. "Human Flight and Brain Drain" remained low.
- The Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU 2023 UAE summary) writes: "The UAE will be politically stable throughout the 2023-27 forecast period, and Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed al-Nahyan will maintain policy stability as president 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. Foreign policy will be guided by commercial ambitions, security concerns about Iran and Islamist militancy 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, while supportive economic policies, including encouraging foreign investment, will support non-oil economic expansion. Diversifying and strengthening the business environment will be prioritized, but hydrocarbons will remain central to the economy."
- According to World Bank's UAE data profile, the employment ratio stands at 80.0% of the population (2022).



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 [2023 Index of Economic Freedom](#), the country's economy ranked as the 24th most free in the world and topped the list for the Middle East and North Africa. The report states: "The UAE has an open economy with a high per capita income and a sizable annual trade surplus. Oil and gas account for approximately 30 percent of GDP. ... Economic restructuring has been underpinned by efforts to strengthen the business climate, boost investment, and foster the emergence of a more vibrant private sector. The generally open trade regime helps to sustain momentum for growth."

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 labor law (HRW 2023 UAE country chapter). Combined with racism, this especially affects Christians from Asian and African countries working in low-paid jobs.

### **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:

- **Main ethnic groups:** The majority of the Emirati population are from Arab decent. 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%.
- **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 88.1% of the total population (2019 est.). The younger generation - up to 24 years of age - makes up 22% of the population.
- **Life expectancy:** 79.8 years on average; women (81.2 years), men (78.4 years) (2023 est.).

According to the UNDP HDR UAE:

- **HDI score and ranking:** The UAE ranks #26 out 191 countries. The combined ratio of life expectancy, education and per capita income gives a very high score of 0.911 on the Human Development Index (HDI).
- **Gender inequality:** With a GDI (Gender Development Index) score of 0.953, 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 2023 country chapter) writes:

- "The *kafala* (sponsorship) system tied migrant workers' visas to their employers, preventing them from changing or leaving employers without permission. Those who left their employers without permission faced punishment for "absconding," including fines, arrest, detention, and deportation, all without any due process guarantees. Many low-paid migrant workers were acutely vulnerable to forced labor. ... A new labor



law, adopted in November 2021, came into force in February 2022, along with executive regulations for its enforcement. The changes include allowing for flexible, temporary, part time, and remote work, as well as explicit language prohibiting sexual harassment and discrimination. It also allows workers to change employers within their probationary period." However, "Domestic workers who face a range of abuses were still excluded from the labor law. While a 2017 law on domestic workers guarantees some labor rights, it is weaker than the labor law and falls short of international standards."

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 (World Factbook UAE, accessed 18 March 2024).

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 Internet World Stats (IWS 2023 UAE):

- **Internet usage:** 109.8% penetration (January 2022)
- **Facebook usage:** 109.8% penetration (January 2022)

According to the World Bank data for UAE:

- **Mobile phone subscriptions per 100 people:** 194.7  
The UAE is one of just a handful of countries where nearly all women report owning a mobile cellphone (GIWPS 2021 UAE).

According to Freedom House's Freedom in the World Index 2023, which classifies the UAE as "not free":

- "The 1980 Publications and Publishing Law, considered one of the most restrictive press laws in the Arab world, 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 authorities, expressing support for dissidents or human rights, or calling for political reform. Leading human rights activist Ahmed Mansoor, who was sentenced to 10 years in prison in 2018 for using social

media to 'publish false information that damages the country's reputation', remained behind bars in 2022.

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 145th out of 180 countries (RSF World Press Freedom 2023 UAE) and reports:

- "The government prevents both local and foreign independent media outlets from thriving by tracking down and persecuting dissenting voices. ... 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. Expatriate Emirati journalists risk being harassed, arrested or extradited."

According to the US State Department (IRFR 2022 UAE, p.17):

- "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 Islamic 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 has been a supporter of General Haftar's Libyan National Army ([HRW, 1 November 2020](#)), although alliances may change (as stated above in *Recent history*). Initially, it 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 also improve 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 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.

## 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 have since 2006 seen 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. However, the UAE government is beginning to take on austerity measures as hydrocarbons are gradually being phased out, which might cause unrest among the Emiratis. 'Emiratization' is also needed to lower the dependency on foreign workers. In addition, the significant youth population - combined with a process of globalization which loosens the state's monopoly over information - indicate that the UAE might have 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 Libya, Yemen, Somalia, 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 it 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. The need to attract further international investment and tourism is likely to ensure a continued openness to (and tolerance of) diversity.

### 3) Christians remain an accepted part of society - except for converts from Islam to Christianity

Although thousands of expatriates (including many Christians) had to leave the country as a consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Christian presence in the UAE is likely to remain significant in the foreseeable future ([BBC News, 9 October 2020](#)). The country remains in need of expatriate workers for both low and high skilled positions. Despite the government's efforts to replace foreign workers with Emirati nationals, especially in the private sector, it is unlikely that these efforts will effect the Christian presence in the country in the short-term. However, the outlook for converts from Islam to Christianity, especially Emirati converts, remains grim in the short-term. It is unlikely that the government will give them more freedom or that Emirati society will start accepting them. However, the government's promotion of tolerance, including the Abraham Accords with Israel, might lead to more acceptance of religious diversity (among the Emiratis) in the long-term.

## External Links - Keys to understanding

- Recent history: Haaretz, 13 May 2022 - <https://www.haaretz.com/middle-east-news/uae-s-long-ailing-president-sheikh-khalifa-bin-zayed-dies-at-73-1.10797921>
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- Recent history: BBC News, 19 June 2020 - <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-29319423>
- Recent history: Brookings, 28 May 2021 - <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2021/05/28/saudi-arabia-and-the-uae-consolidating-strategic-positions-in-yemens-east-and-islands/>
- Recent history: Reuters, 6 July 2021 - <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/opec-disagreement-lays-bare-growing-uae-saudi-economic-rivalry-2021-07-05/>
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- Recent history: The Arab Weekly, 8 April 2021 - <https://the arabweekly.com/uae-pledges-support-libyas-new-unity-government>
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- Recent history: Atlantic Council, 27 October 2022 - <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/the-uae-is-making-a-precarious-shift-in-its-libya-policy-heres-why/>
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- Recent history: BBC News, 15 September 2020 - <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-54151712>
- Recent history: AGSIW, 26 February 2021 - <https://agsiw.org/diplomacy-with-iran-opportunities-and-risks-for-the-uae/>
- Recent history: Clingendael, 5 March 2024 - <https://www.clingendael.org/publication/iran-and-gaza-regional-perspective-winning-battle-losing-war>
- Recent history: The Guardian, 8 February 2024 - <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2024/feb/08/iran-backed-hackers-interrupt-uae-tv-streaming-services-with-deepfake-news>
- Recent history: Chatham House, 28 March 2023 - <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2023/03/abraham-accords-and-israel-uae-normalization>

- Recent history: Reuters, 10 October 2023 - <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/uae-after-israel-gaza-conflict-says-it-does-not-mix-trade-with-politics-2023-10-10/>
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## WWL 2024: Church information / UAE

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

## Church spectrum today

United Arab Emirates: Church networks	Christians	%
Orthodox	80,100	7.1
Catholic	992,000	88.2
Protestant	30,000	2.7
Independent	17,600	1.6
Unaffiliated	30,000	2.7
Doubly-affiliated Christians	-25,400	-2.3
<b>Total</b>	<b>1,124,300</b>	<b>99.9</b>
<i>(Any deviation from the total number of Christians stated above is due to the rounding of decimals)</i>		
Evangelical movement	15,800	1.4
Renewalist movement	288,000	25.6

Data source: Todd M. Johnson and Gina A. Zurlo, eds., *World Christian Database* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed March 2023)

**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. **Renewalist movement:** Church members involved in Pentecostal/Charismatic renewal.

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.

## Areas where Christians face most difficulties

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.

Pressure on converts from Islam to Christianity mostly depends on the community which they are part of, rather than the geographical area they are living (see below: *Persecution engines*).

## 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 category. They enjoy some freedom but also face 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. The churches in the UAE are mostly built close together on a church compound and often 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 until recently. Although the ruling Emirati families donated land for church construction, 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.

**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).

## External Links - Church information

- Christian origins: Christian monastery - <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/christian-monastery-found-united-arab-emirates-siniyah-island/>



## WWL 2024: Persecution Dynamics / UAE

### Reporting period

1 October 2022 - 30 September 2023

### Position on the World Watch List

United Arab Emirates: World Watch List	Points	WWL Rank
WWL 2024	61	57
WWL 2023	62	54
WWL 2022	62	54
WWL 2021	62	53
WWL 2020	60	47

In WWL 2024, the score for UAE decreased from 62 to 61 points, dropping from rank 54 to 57 and staying again outside of the WWL Top 50. The average pressure on Christians decreased very slightly and remained at a very high level (12.0 points), while the violence score fell from 1.1 points to 0.7 points. Although the Emirates improved in terms of acceptance and tolerance towards Christianity (and other non-Muslim religions), the country increased its monitoring of Christians and churches alike, including advanced surveillance techniques. Pressure remained especially high for converts from Islam to Christianity, with expatriate Christians remaining free to worship in private or in the designated church compounds, but not being allowed to evangelize or pray in public.

### Persecution engines

United Arab Emirates: Persecution engines	Abbreviation	Level of influence
Islamic oppression	IO	Medium
Religious nationalism	RN	Not at all
Ethno-religious hostility	ERH	Not at all
Clan oppression	CO	Medium
Christian denominational protectionism	CDP	Not at all
Communist and post-Communist oppression	CPCO	Not at all

*(Table continued below)*

United Arab Emirates: Persecution engines	Abbreviation	Level of influence
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 (Medium) / Clan oppression (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. 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 wider 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.

Different levels of persecution exist 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

UAE: Drivers of persecution	IO	RN	ERH	CO	CDP	CPCO	SI	DPA	OCC
	MEDIUM			MEDIUM				MEDIUM	
Government officials	Medium							Medium	
Ethnic group leaders	Weak								
Non-Christian religious leaders	Weak								
Citizens (people from the broader society), including mobs	Medium			Medium					
One's own (extended) family	Strong			Medium					

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

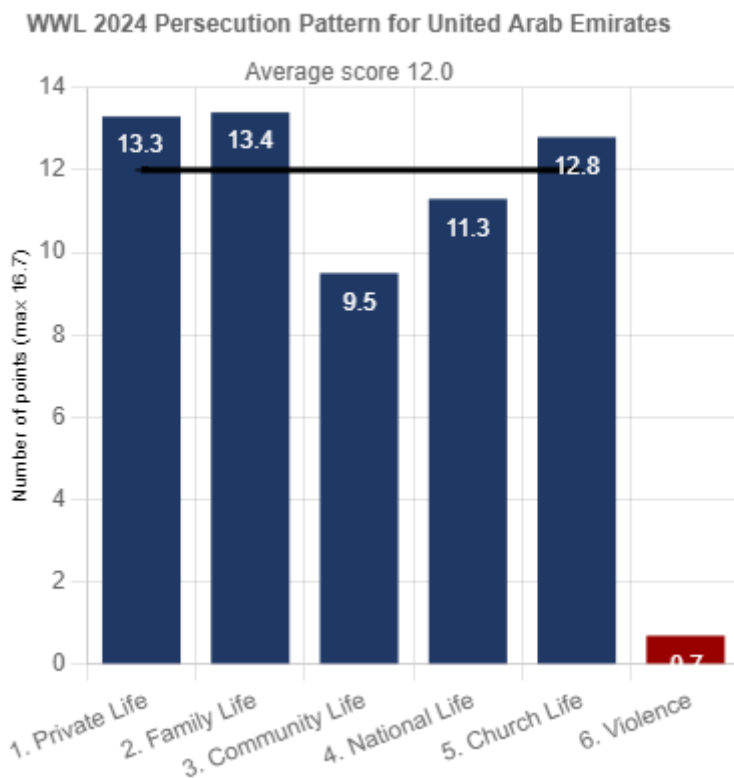
### Drivers of Islamic oppression / Clan oppression

- 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. According to the US State Department (IRFR 2022 UAE): "The law does not directly prohibit Muslims from converting to other religions; but the penal code's blasphemy provisions punish behavior viewed as contemptuous of the Quran and the Prophet Muhammad or offensive to Islamic teachings."
- 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 would be the ones to apply pressure in line with the cultural norms of the home country.
- Citizens (people from society in general) (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](#) (UAE Constitution 1971/2004).
- 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.

### Drivers of Dictatorial paranoia

- Government officials (Medium):** The UAE government does not allow criticism, especially not from (foreign) Christians. According to Freedom House's Global Freedom Index 2023 UAE: "The civil liberties of both citizens and noncitizens, who make up an overwhelming majority of the population, are subject to significant restrictions. ... A number of laws give authorities broad discretion to punish individuals' speech on sensitive topics. 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 new cybercrime law that took effect in January 2022 ... features a broad definition of unlawful content; it bans any material that could harm state interests or public confidence in state institutions, among other provisions, and assigns penalties of up to life in prison for use of the internet to oppose the existing system of government. A new penal code that also took effect in January contains similarly expansive prohibitions ... . These and other criminal laws have been actively enforced, including against ordinary social media users."

### The Persecution pattern



The WWL 2024 Persecution pattern for UAE shows:

- The average pressure on Christians is at a very high level (12.0 points), down from 12.1 points in WWL 2023.

- Although all spheres of life show high and very high levels of pressure, pressure is highest in the *Family, Private* and *Church spheres*. 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 decreased from 1.1 to 0.7 points in WWL 2024. The very 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. It is also probable that violence has been under-reported.

## Pressure in the 5 spheres of life

*In each of the five spheres of life discussed below, four questions have been selected from the WWL 2024 questionnaire for brief commentary and explanation. The selection usually (but not always) reflects the highest scoring elements. 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 of 0-4 points, please see the “WWL Scoring example” in the WWL Methodology, available at: <https://opendoorsanalytical.org/world-watch-list-documentation/>, password: freedom).*

## Pressure in Block 1 / Private sphere

### **Block 1.1: Conversion has been opposed, forbidden, or punishable, including conversion from one type of Christianity to another. (3.50 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 is for example not unlikely that they will be fired by their employers if their new faith becomes known; which means that they will have to leave the country if they cannot find another job.

### **Block 1.4: It has been risky for Christians to reveal their faith in written forms of personal expression (including expressions in blogs and Facebook etc.). (3.50 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.

### **Block 1.5: It has been risky for Christians to display Christian images or symbols. (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 jewelry), is not problematic - although many would choose to do so discreetly out of respect for the local culture.

**Block 1.8: It has been risky for Christians to speak about their faith with those other than immediate family (extended family, others). (3.25 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.

**Block 1 - Additional information**

Due to the serious social discrimination against converts from Islam to Christianity, 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.

## Pressure in Block 2 / Family sphere

**Block 2.2: Registering the birth, wedding, death, etc. of Christians has been hindered or made impossible. (3.50 points)**

There is no recognition of conversion, hence it is impossible for converts to have and register a Christian marriage, nor can their children be registered as Christians or be given Christian names.

**Block 2.8: Christian children have been pressured into attending anti-Christian or majority religion teaching at any level of education. (3.50 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.

**Block 2.4: Christian baptisms have been hindered. (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 and this definite change of religion is a very sensitive issue, especially for Emirati converts. Foreign expatriate converts might have more freedom, depending on the community they are part of; nonetheless, for converts from some Muslim countries baptism is as dangerous as for Emirati converts.

**Block 2.13: Christians have lost their inheritance rights because of their conversion to Christianity or (if a person already was a Christian) other types of Christianity. (3.00 points)**

The loss of inheritance is 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).

**Block 2 - Additional information**

The *Family sphere of life* scores the highest levels of pressure, which 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.

## Pressure in Block 3 / Community sphere

**Block 3.2: 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.). (3.50 points)**

There is a high level of surveillance in the UAE, making it likely that individual Christians are being monitored. There is a high awareness among Christians that their (online) activities are under observation. This awareness causes Christians to self-censor and adapt their behavior, especially converts and those among the expatriate Christians who are keen to share their faith.

**Block 3.5: Christians have been put under pressure to take part in non-Christian religious ceremonies or community events. (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.

**Block 3.7: Christians have been pressured by their community to renounce their faith. (3.25 points)**

If converts from a Muslim background are discovered, they 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 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.

**Block 3.13: Christians have been interrogated or compelled to report to the local vigilante/police for faith-related reasons. (3.25 points)**

High levels of surveillance make most Christians careful in sharing their faith. Emirati authorities will question those who are suspected of proselytizing. In the recent past, several Christians have been deported from the country following accusations of proselytism. Usually, despite the long-term prison sentences codified in the penal code, accused Christians will not be sentenced and imprisoned. The government is very sensitive regarding its international reputation and will not risk being accused of religious persecution. However, this is especially applicable to Christians from a Western background. Christians from a non-Western background are less protected and at a higher risk of mistreatment.

**Block 3 - Additional information**

For Christians in the UAE, community life can be difficult, especially for converts from Islam to Christianity. However, one's ethnic background can be just as important as one's religious convictions, since racial prejudices and racism are prevalent in the country.

## Pressure in Block 4 / National sphere

**Block 4.1: The Constitution (or comparable national or state law) limits freedom of religion as formulated in Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. (3.75 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 criticized). 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.

**Block 4.8: Christians have been hindered in expressing their views or opinions in public. (3.75 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.

**Block 4.2: Officials have refused to recognize an individual's conversion as recorded in government administration systems, identify cards (etc.). (3.50 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 governments.

**Block 4.12: Christians, churches or Christian organizations have been hindered in publicly displaying religious symbols. (3.50 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 such as losing approval for holding 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.

**Block 4 - Additional information**

Within the *National sphere of life*, it is also the case that converts from Islam to Christianity face most pressure. Known Emirate converts will most likely face discrimination when engaging with government officials, will lose access to government jobs and, if not fired, will likely miss out on any form of promotion. Because of the close ties between tribes, families and government, they are also likely to lose their business contacts and contracts, if they are running a business.

## Pressure in Block 5 / Church sphere

**Block 5.1: Church activities have been monitored, hindered, disturbed, or obstructed. (3.50 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 (CDA) 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 the authorities became aware of the very large number of Christian groups in Dubai meeting in schools, hotels and other places of gathering, this move by the CDA had a significant impact. Many of these groups have had to cease their activities.

**Block 5.7: Churches have been hindered from openly integrating converts. (3.50 points)**

For expatriate churches, proselytism and accepting converts from Islam to Christianity in their midst are by far the most sensitive issues with regard to the Emirate government and society. Relationships with the government are generally good, but only as long as the churches stay away from the convert community. In practice, this means that the convert community has to operate on its own; often without much-needed (spiritual) guidance.

**Block 5.2: It has been difficult to get registration or legal status for churches at any level of government. (3.25 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. However, as long as a registered church has capacity, there does not seem to be any restrictions on who else a registered church may sponsor. Even the numbers of visas granted for church leaders is generous.

**Block 5.14: Openly selling or distributing Bibles (or other Christian materials) has been hindered. (3.25 points)**

Bibles and Christian materials can be sold and distributed inside the designated church compounds; however, such materials cannot generally be sold or distributed outside the church compounds, e.g., in bookstores, where making Christian literature available would be considered proselytizing. Church compounds are only located in urban areas resulting in restricted access for Christians residing in rural areas. Emirati and expatriate Muslims theoretically could access the church compounds; however, societal repercussions and the threat of government surveillance make this unlikely to happen.

**Block 5 - Additional information**

The lack of church buildings (forcing many fellowships to share a church building with more than fifty other groups 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 church communities. Churches cannot buy land themselves and have to request the government to allocate a plot of land to them. Permission to build churches is granted at times, but the process remains lengthy and difficult. The Christian communities in the UAE are very active and having many churches might make the Emiratis feel uncomfortable as they perceive churches as a threat to the Islamic character of the country.

## Violence

Violence is defined in WWL Methodology as the deprivation of physical freedom or as bodily harm to Christians or damage to their property. It includes severe threats (mental abuse). The table is based on reported cases as much as possible, but since many incidents go unreported, the numbers must be understood as being minimum figures. The following points should be considered when using the data provided in the Block 6 table:

**1. Some incidents go unreported because the Christians involved choose not to speak about the hostility being faced.**

Possible reasons for this may be:

- *Doing so would expose them to more attacks. For example, if a family member is killed because of his/her faith, the survivors might decide to keep silent about the circumstances of the killing to avoid provoking any further attacks.*
- *In some circumstances, the reticence to pass on information may be due to the danger of exposure caused by converts returning to their previous faith.*
- *If persecution is related to sexual violence - due to stigma, survivors often do not tell even their closest relatives.*
- *In some cultural settings, if your loved one is killed, you might be under the obligation to take revenge. Christians not wishing to do that, may decide to keep quiet about it.*

**2. Other incidents go unreported for the following possible reasons**

- *Some incidents never reach the public consciousness, because no one really knows about it; or the incident is simply not considered worth reporting; or media coverage is deliberately blocked or distorted; or media coverage is not deliberately blocked, but the information somehow gets lost; or the incidents are deliberately not reported widely for security reasons (e.g. for the protection of local church leaders).*
- *In situations where Christians have been discriminated against for many years, armed conflict can make them additionally vulnerable. Christians killed in areas where fighting regularly takes place are unlikely to be reported separately. Examples in recent years have been Sudan, Syria and Myanmar.*
- *Christians who die through the deprivation of basic necessities such as clean water and medical care (due to long-term discrimination) are unlikely to be reported separately. Christians are not always killed directly; they can be so squeezed by regulations and other oppressive factors that they die – not at once, but in the course of years. This often includes the deprivation of basic necessities such as clean water and medical care, or exclusion from government assisted socio-economic development projects. These numbers could be immense.*

**3. The use of symbolic numbers**

*In cases where it has been impossible to count exactly, a symbolic round figure (10\*, 100\* etc.) is given and indicated with an asterisk. 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 1,000\* could go well over 10,000 but, again, the real number is uncertain. The same applies for symbolic numbers 10,000\*, 100,000\* and 1,000,000\*: Each could indicate much higher numbers, but WWR chooses to be cautious because the real number is uncertain.*

United Arab Emirates: Violence scores per Block 6 question in questionnaire	WWL 2024	WWL 2023
6.1 How many Christians have been killed for faith-related reasons (including state sanctioned executions)?	0	0
6.2 How many churches or public Christian properties (schools, hospitals, cemeteries, etc.) have been attacked, damaged, bombed, looted, destroyed, burned down, closed or confiscated for faith-related reasons?	0	0
6.3 How many Christians have been detained for faith-related reasons?	0	0
6.4 How many Christians have been sentenced to jail, labor camp, sent to psychiatric hospital as punishment, or similar things for faith-related reasons?	0	0
6.5 How many Christians have been abducted for faith-related reasons (including Christians missing in a persecution context)?	0	0
6.6 How many Christians have been raped or otherwise sexually harassed for faith-related reasons?	0	10 *
6.7 How many cases have there been of forced marriages of Christians to non-Christians?	0	0
6.8 How many Christians have been otherwise physically or mentally abused for faith-related reasons (including beatings and death threats)?	10 *	10 *
6.9 How many houses of Christians or other property (excluding shops) have been attacked, damaged, bombed, looted, destroyed, burned down or confiscated for faith-related reasons?	0	0
6.10 How many shops or businesses of Christians have been attacked, damaged, bombed, looted, destroyed, burned down, closed or confiscated for faith-related reasons?	0	0
6.11 How many Christians have been forced to leave their homes or go into hiding in-country for faith-related reasons?	1	0
6.12 How many Christians have been forced to leave the country for faith-related reasons?	0	0

- Christians attacked:** It is widely known that house-maids working in the domestic sphere are vulnerable to incidents of 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 temporary travel ban to Kuwait in 2018, 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 abuse are very difficult to provide. It is also difficult to prove that any abuse is due to the house-maid being a non-Muslim. Nevertheless, given the high number of Christian expatriates in the country, conservative estimates agree that at least 10 Christian house-maids were abused in the WWL 2024 reporting period, with their faith being one of the factors making them more vulnerable.

- **Christians forced to go into hiding:** At least one case has been reported in which an expatriate convert from Islam to Christianity had to hide because of family pressure.

## 5 Year trends

The following three charts show the levels of pressure and violence faced by Christians in the country over the last five WWL reporting periods.

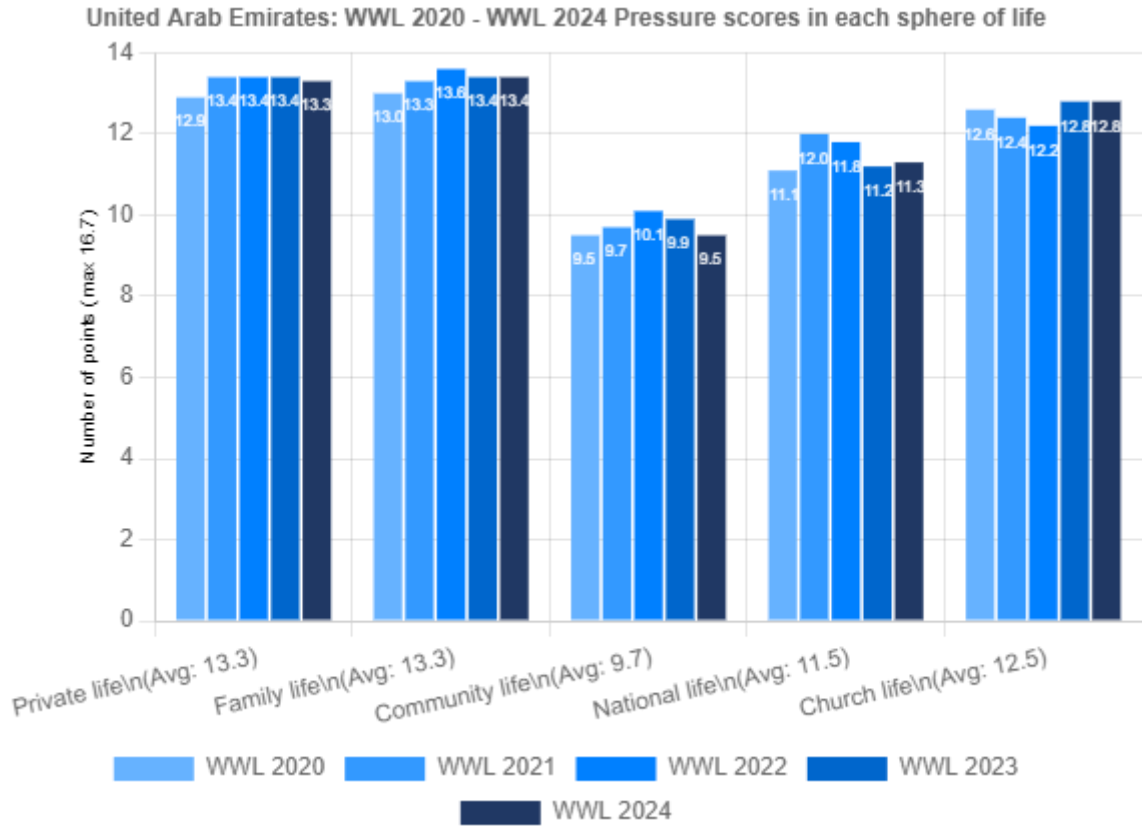
### 5 Year trends: Average pressure

United Arab Emirates: WWL 2020 - WWL 2024	Average pressure over 5 Spheres of life
2024	12.0
2023	12.1
2022	12.2
2021	12.2
2020	11.8

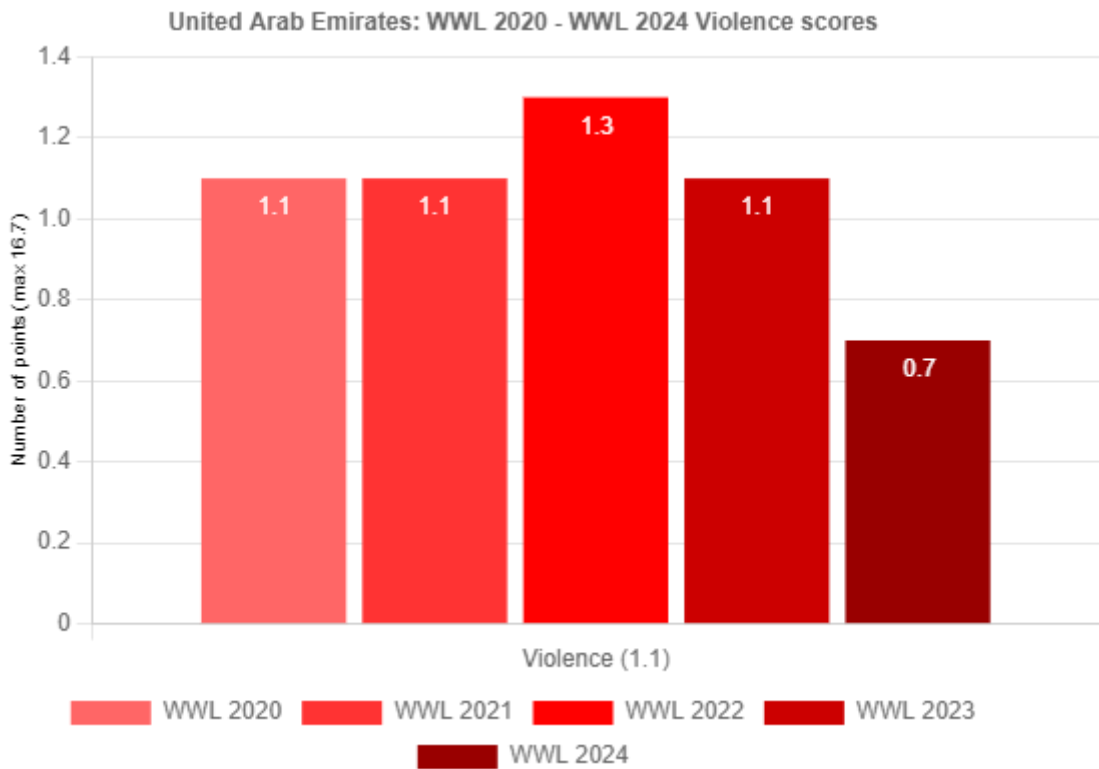
The table above, depicting average pressure, shows that the overall level of pressure on Christians has remained at a very high level with very slight differences year on year. For the last five reporting periods, average pressure has consistently scored between 11.8 and 12.2 points. This is a reflection of the fact that the situation for converts in particular remains very difficult.

### 5 Year trends: Pressure in each sphere of life

As can be seen in the chart below, reported pressure levels have seen variations year on year, but - within each *sphere of life* - have remained largely at the same level. The overall higher scoring *Private* and *Family spheres of life* reflect the difficulty for (Emirati) converts to Christianity to live out their faith.



### 5 Year trends: Violence against Christians



The number of violent incidents recorded in the last five reporting periods has been very low. This pattern of very low levels of violence is typical for a Gulf country where very high levels of pressure ensure that almost nobody 'crosses the line'. However, due to the restricted nature of society, it is also possible that the number of incidents is underreported.

## Gender-specific religious persecution / Female

Group	Female Pressure Points
Economic	-
Political and Legal	Denied legal ability to marry Christian spouse; Forced marriage
Security	Violence – physical
Social and Cultural	Violence – psychological
Technological	-

In general, women are vulnerable in the UAE, as domestic violence and marital rape are permitted without legal consequence (HRW 2023, UAE country chapter). The Georgetown Women, Peace and Security Index notes legal gender discrimination present; although the UAE has the best legal score in the MENA region, the region is the worst performing globally (GIWPS 2021 UAE profile). 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. As described by a country expert, women have "less privileges and rights than the men in this patriarchal society, and may be questioned more if they engage in activities outside their home."

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, she could be placed under house arrest, beaten or coerced into marriage with a Muslim. 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 (James Berry, 5 February 2017, '[Overview of Mixed Marriages and the Law in the UAE](#)'). 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 could 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.

House-maids working in the UAE often face sexual harassment or slave-like treatment. The ill-treatment of migrant workers, including sexual abuse, has become a high-profile issue at the international level. Although not primarily faith-related, many Christian domestic migrant workers, almost all of whom are female, experience (sexual) abuse.

## Gender-specific religious persecution / Male

Group	Male Pressure Points
Economic	Economic harassment via fines
Political and Legal	-
Security	Forced out of home – expulsion
Social and Cultural	Violence – psychological
Technological	-

In the UAE, men who convert to Christianity have been abandoned by their families and treated as shameful social outcasts. A convert is likely to lose custody of his children and his wife may divorce him. Familial rejection is not only an emotional blow felt by converts, it also represents a loss of social standing. As a country expert explains: “If shame is brought on the family by the husband, it can affect the entire family. Wives may be pressured to divorce a Christian husband, which can destroy the family unit.”

Without the financial support of their families or the necessary connections to find or maintain a job, it can be extremely difficult to find employment in this network-based society. This can also lead to men being pressured into participating in non-Christian religious events, counter to his beliefs, in order to remain employed and keep social status. A country expert stated that “men are expected to attend Friday prayers and participate in public religious events (prayer, Eid) ... they are questioned by family/community if they don’t.” This has major implications for all his family members since men are traditionally the family providers. Furthermore, without family and the accompanying social status, a man will be unable to find a family willing to give their daughter permission to marry him. Such pressure can cause some men to leave the UAE in search of greater freedom.

Migrant Christian men can also face challenges, such not being allowed to conduct any acts of worship within living quarters.

## Persecution of other religious minorities

Among expatriate communities, many other religious minority communities enjoy a similar level of freedom to Christians, for instance Judaism, Hinduism and Buddhism.

According to the US State Department (IRFR 2022 UAE):

- (p.2): "According to non-Muslim religious community representatives, there was a high degree of societal tolerance for minority religious beliefs and traditions, particularly for those associated with houses of worship officially recognized by the federal or local emirate governments, although conversion from Islam was strongly discouraged, conversion to Islam was encouraged."
- (p.15): "The government continued to permit Shia Muslims to observe Ashura in private but not in public. There were no public processions in Dubai or the northern emirates, where



the majority of the country's Shia population resides, due to federal laws against public gatherings."

- (p.14): "Shia adherents worshiped in and maintained their own mosques. The government considered all Shia mosques to be private; however, they were technically eligible to receive some funds from the government upon request. Shia sources said they doubted the government would provide funding in practice, and therefore did not seek it."

## Future outlook

The outlook for Christians as viewed through the lens of:

### **Islamic oppression (combined with Clan 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 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 - Persecution Dynamics

- Drivers of persecution description: principal source of legislation - [https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/United\\_Arab\\_Emirates\\_2004.pdf](https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/United_Arab_Emirates_2004.pdf)
- Gender-specific religious persecution Female description: Overview of Mixed Marriages and the Law in the UAE - <https://jamesberrylaw.com/article-details/1194/overview-of-mixed-marriages-and-the-law-in-the-uae>

## 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/>.

As in earlier years, these are also available on the Open Doors Analytical website (password: freedom):

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