

UNITED ARAB EMIRATES: Pope Francis, and the west, should be wary of the UAE's tolerance agenda

The papal visit is a breakthrough for religious tolerance in the heart of the Muslim world, but severe problems there persist.

By Nina Shea

National Review (05.02.2019) – <https://bit.ly/2RIp2m0> – On Sunday, February 3, history was made when Pope Francis landed in the United Arab Emirates, marking the first time any pope has been permitted to set foot anywhere on the Arabian Peninsula in over a thousand years. The papal visit is a breakthrough for religious tolerance in the heart of the Muslim world. But all the hype and hoopla attending it and the risible boasts of openness by the UAE government should not blind us to severe problems that persist.

By the end of his three-day visit, the pope will have been welcomed by the crown prince at the presidential palace, joined by the grand mufti of Al Azhar to sign a document on “human fraternity for world peace and living together,” and invited to dialogue with the local Muslim Council of Elders. It will have culminated in an open-air Mass at which he presided before 120,000 Christians in Abu Dhabi's Zayed Sports City Stadium. While small by the standards of other

papal trips – the Mass in Panama last month had 400,000 in attendance – this will be the largest public Christian worship service held on the peninsula since Islam took hold there in the seventh century.

The UAE is using the occasion to declare 2019 “the Year of Tolerance,” announce a Festival of Tolerance, establish a new cabinet post for a minister of tolerance, and open a state Internet portal on tolerance. In an attempt to rebrand itself as religiously tolerant, it has brought in planes filled with Western opinion-makers, think-tank scholars, and envoys to observe these efforts. It is the UAE’s spiritual equivalent to its flashy displays of modern wealth – the over-the-top shopping malls replete with ski resorts, the palm-tree-shaped man-made luxury islands, etc.

On one hand, this is real progress. It further erodes an ancient taboo against religious freedom on the Arabian Peninsula. Attributed to Islam’s Prophet Mohammed, tradition holds that no religion other than Islam is permissible there. For many centuries none was. Christianity had once been well established in the region, and the ruins of a sixth-century Christian monastery can still be seen on the UAE’s Sir Bani Yas Island. But by the eighth century, all churches and Christian communities had disappeared. Even now few nationals of the UAE or in any other of the Arabian Peninsula countries dare openly profess a faith other than Islam.

Without taking into account Saudi Arabia, the UAE’s neighbor and closest ally, it is impossible to assess the UAE’s new cultural campaign. When I visited Riyadh in 2011 as a commissioner on the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), the director of the official Saudi National

Human Rights Commission explained that churches are forbidden in his country because all of it is “a sacred mosque” for Islam’s holiest shrines in Mecca and Medina—two cities completely closed to non-Muslims. That has not changed. As recently as 2015, Grand Mufti Abdul-Aziz ibn Abdullah Al ash-Sheikh, Saudi Arabia’s chief religious and legal authority, openly declared that all churches in the entire peninsula region should be destroyed. The Saudi cabinet shakeup after the Khashoggi murder scandal did not touch the grand mufti – he remains in that office to this day. Saudi Arabia’s intolerant policies are reinforced by the government’s educational system, in which there is “a troubling rise in intolerant content in Saudi textbooks promoting hatred and violence” against non-Muslims, women, and gays, according to a recent USCIRF report.

In this context, that the UAE celebrates the arrival of the Catholic pope and allows some churches and a public worship service for its non-Muslim foreign workers is a significant development. But, by wrapping itself in the mantle of religious tolerance, the UAE invites closer scrutiny, on its own terms. It bears noting, for example, that in a recent Pew Research Center index the UAE is ranked “high” for government restrictions on religion. And in 2018 it ranked 45th among the world’s top 50 religious persecutors, according to the respected Christian advocacy group Open Doors. The UAE looks good compared with Saudi Arabia, but it is hardly a paragon of religious tolerance and freedom.

The UAE, like the rest of the Gulf, employs millions of foreign workers, including nearly a million Christians, who account for 12 percent of the population, rivaling the number of its Muslim nationals; almost 90 percent of the country’s population consists of expatriates. The Christians among them

are afforded few rights. Since the 1960s, they have been permitted churches and schools, but in severely limited numbers.

By far the largest Christian community in the UAE is the Catholic, which counts 870,000 members. Their 150 nationalities are reflected in the Mass schedules – English, Tagalog, Arabic, Malayalam, Konkani, Tamil, Urdu, Spanish, Korean, etc. Their worship services have been described as exuberant, and the churches function as social-support centers for these sojourners on temporary work visas, who exist on the margins of UAE national life. Some observers say this is freedom of worship. But it is more like token tolerance. In reality, only a small fraction of Catholics in the UAE can go to church. Half a century ago the government adopted a policy to allow churches but since then has permitted only nine Catholic churches to be built, or one church for every 100,000 Catholics.

Catholic services outside these churches are illegal. Church exteriors must be stripped of their crosses, bells, and all Christian imagery. Religious literature is restricted. Evangelization is banned and blasphemy against Islam is a crime. Anti-Semitism is promoted. Islam itself is tightly restricted: The imams are employed by the state, and the content of Friday mosque sermons is prescribed by the government. Nationals are not free to choose a religion other than Islam.

The seven federated emirates of the UAE remain under authoritarian governance that curbs religious freedom along with free speech, due process, and other basic rights. Its growing tolerance of Christian churches and Sikh and Hindu

temples within its territory is delivered as a top-down “privilege” rather than respected as a guaranteed democratic right. This means that the evolution of religious freedom in this region is not inevitable.

In the events this week, the UAE is acting as Saudi Arabia’s more liberal alter ego. At a time when American support for Saudi Arabia is wearing thin, these Gulf countries are anxious to shore it up by having the UAE show a modicum of the religious tolerance that Saudi Arabia has promised but failed to deliver. The West should commend the UAE at this time but keep it in perspective.

Pope Francis comes to Abu Dhabi hoping for more churches on the Arabian Peninsula and desperate for dignity and respect for all humanity throughout the larger Muslim world. The Catholic Church and other Christian communities in Iraq and Syria are struggling to recover from genocide that was supported by nations in the Gulf. Sunni intolerance continues to threaten Catholic and other Christian communities in Asia and Africa. During a Mass only last Sunday, ISIS blew up a Catholic cathedral in the Philippines.

For this papal visit, Bishop Paul Hinder, apostolic vicar for Southern Arabia, has adopted a theme from the opening line of the Prayer of Saint Francis of Assisi: “Make me a channel of your peace!” Saint Francis braved shipwreck, beatings, and a perilous journey through the battlefield of the Fifth Crusade to meet with the sultan of Egypt, to build greater human understanding and peace with the Muslim world. Eight hundred years later, the great saint’s papal namesake seeks, in his own way, the same from the Muslim leaders of our own day. The rest of the West should too.

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UNITED ARAB EMIRATES: Religious freedom report

ACN International (2019) – <https://bit.ly/2D66qHl>

Legal framework on freedom of religion and actual application

The United Arab Emirates (UAE) is a federation of seven emirates situated in the Persian Gulf. Dubai is politically and economically the most important of them.

According to the constitution of 1971,[1] Islam is the official religion in the federation. Article 7 reads: “Islam is the official religion of the UAE. The Islamic Shari’a is a

main source of legislation in the UAE.” Article 25 excludes discrimination based on religion. It reads: “All persons are equal in law. There shall be no distinction among the citizens of the UAE on the basis of race, nationality, faith or social status.” Article 32 reads: “Freedom to exercise religious worship is guaranteed in accordance with the generally accepted traditions provided that such freedom is consistent with the public policy or does not violate the public morals.”

Muslim citizens do not have the right to change religion. Apostasy in Islam is punishable by death. Apostasy is criminalised in accordance with hudud offences, which are based on Islamic law and incorporated in the country’s Penal Code. These include “adultery, apostasy, murder, theft, highway robbery that involves killing, and a false accusation of committing adultery”.^[2] Article 1 of the penal code provides that Islamic law applies in hudud cases, including the payment of blood money and murder. Article 66 states that the “original punishments” under the law include punishments of hudud crimes, including the death penalty. No one, however, has been prosecuted or punished by a court for such an offence.

The law criminalises blasphemy and imposes fines and imprisonment as punishment. Insulting other religions is also banned. Non-citizens face deportation in case of blasphemy.

While Muslims may proselytise, penalties are in place for non-Muslims proselytising among Muslims. If caught, non-citizens may have their residency revoked and face deportation.

Shari'a law is applied in matters of personal status for Muslim citizens and residents. Muslim men may marry non-Muslim women 'of the book', i.e. Christians or Jews. Muslim women can only marry Muslim men. In the case of a mixed marriage between a Muslim man and a non-Muslim woman, child custody is granted to the father. Non-Muslim wives are not eligible for naturalisation.

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

The government controls content in almost every Sunni mosque. Textbooks and curricula in both private and public schools are censored by the Ministry of Education.[3]

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

In July 2015, the UAE announced new legislation for crimes related to religious hatred and extremism. These included the death penalty. A presidential decree bans any act that stirs up religious hatred as well as discrimination "on the basis of religion, caste, creed, doctrine, race, colour or ethnic origin".[4] According to the decree carried by an official news agency, offenders risk up to 10 years in prison or the death penalty if convicted of "takfirism" (declaring other Muslims infidels) or Sunni Muslim extremism.

Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid, Vice President and Ruler of Dubai, said the law "guarantees the freedom of individuals from

religious intolerance ... and underpins the UAE's policy of inclusiveness".[5] Jesuit priest Father Samir Khalil commented: "By doing this, the UAE has taken a step forward with regard to religious freedom, still the exception to the rule in Muslim countries."[6]

Non-citizen residents come mainly as guest workers from South and South East Asia, but also from the Middle East, Europe and North America. Although recent numbers are not available, the majority of residents are Muslims. According to the last census (2005), more than three-quarters of the population are Muslims, with Christians the next largest group.[7]

The Catholic Church is present through the Apostolic Vicariate of Southern Arabia (AVOSA) with its seat in Abu Dhabi, currently occupied by Bishop Paul Hinder. Eight Catholic parishes and nine schools operate in the UAE. The number of Catholics is estimated to be around 800,000.[8]

There are also Protestant and Orthodox communities. In total, more than 35 churches operate as well as two Hindu temples. Given the large numbers of worshippers, they are often overcrowded.

Incidents

According to the International Religious Freedom Report for 2016[9], the UAE government continues to provide land for Christian churches (as well as Sikh and Hindu temples). It also provides land for non-Islamic cemeteries and cremation facilities for the country's large Hindu community.

In November 2016, UAE authorities held a conference[10] to discuss ways to promote tolerance and understanding. Religious representatives were among the invited guests, among them Justin Welby, Archbishop of Canterbury, the most senior cleric in the Church of England, and Dr Ahmed El Tayeb, Grand Imam of Al Azhar and president of the UAE's Muslim Council of Elders. It was decided that a union would be formed for youth from various cultures and nationalities and aimed at improving and encouraging tolerance.

In June 2017, Abu Dhabi's Crown Prince and Deputy Supreme Commander of the UAE armed forces, Sheikh Mohammad bin Zayed Al-Nahyan, ordered that the Sheikh Mohammad bin Zayed Mosque be renamed "Mary, Mother of Jesus". This decision was taken in order to "consolidate bonds of humanity between followers of different religions".[11] The move to rename the mosque reflects UAE initiatives to promote religious tolerance in the region.

In December 2017, UAE Prime Minister and Dubai Emir Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid al-Maktoum declared that the pedestrian bridge over the recently built Dubai Canal be named "Tolerance Bridge".[12] He had previously tweeted that "Love and tolerance are bridges of communication and a universal language, binding humanity across different languages, religions and cultures". He added that "these are the foundations of the Emirates".

From 11th – 13th December 2017 the Forum for Promoting Peace in Muslim Societies was organised in Abu Dhabi. Hosted by the Emirati Minister of Foreign Affairs and International

Cooperation Sheikh Abdullah bin Zayed Al Nahyan, the theme of this fourth round of the Forum was “Global Peace and the Fear of Islam: Countering the Spread of Extremism”.[13] A joint cooperation agreement between the United Nations and the Forum was announced by Undersecretary-General and United Nations Special Adviser on the Prevention of Genocide, Adama Dieng. This cooperation consists in organising 10 research workshops to promote religious education in the Islamic world.[14]

Prospects for freedom of religion

One can expect freedom of religion to improve in the coming years in the UAE. Local Church leaders describe the atmosphere as friendly and praise the open atmosphere in the country.[15] George,[16] a Maronite Christian born to Lebanese parents, told ACN: “The UAE is a good place for Christians to live in. There are limits, of course, but respecting them [means] one has a good life there.” The new law against religious hatred is a hopeful sign.

Endnotes / Sources

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USA/SAUDI ARABIA/UAE: Ivanka Trump 'inspires' a \$100 million donation from Saudi Arabia and the UAE to a women's empowerment fund

- The funding will not be used to promote priority women's rights issues in Saudi Arabia nor the UAE
- The World Economic Forum ranked Saudi Arabia 141st out of 144 countries in its 2016 Global Gender Gap Index, showing a worsening situation as it was ranked 134th in 2015.

HRWF (24.05.2017) – As U.S. President Donald Trump is on an official visit to Belgium today, *Human Rights Without Frontiers* criticizes the President and his daughter for paying lip service to the authorities of the Arabic Peninsula regarding women's empowerment issues.

During their visit, Ivanka Trump, President Trump's eldest daughter and senior White House advisor, discussed women's rights and apparently 'inspired' a large donation to be made to women's empowerment; however, within these talks Ivanka Trump failed to address the serious violations of women's fundamental rights in both Saudi Arabia and the UAE.

The \$100 million donation

On the occasion of President Trump's visit to Ryad, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates donated \$100 million to the World Bank Women Entrepreneurs Fund, a fund supposedly "proposed" by Ivanka Trump.

The donation is aimed at efforts for women in the Middle East. The Wall Street Journal reports that the fund will specifically support women who start businesses [1]. Ivanka Trump will not have any influence over the allocation of these funds.

This news is shocking and paradoxical, as women's fundamental rights are severely violated in the region. In Saudi Arabia, for example, women are banned from driving and are required to receive permission from a male guardian to travel or wed.

At a meeting with elite professional women in Saudi Arabia, Ivanka Trump remarked that the country's progress on women's rights has been "very encouraging" but that "there's still a lot of work to be done".

How oppressed are women in Saudi Arabia?

The shocking nature of these meetings and the donation can only be understood upon the recognition of the severity of human rights violations for women in the country.

"The World Economic Forum [3] ranked Saudi Arabia near the bottom in its 2016 Global Gender Gap Index, with the country

earning 141st out of 144 countries in 2016. Ranked at 134th in 2015, the situation in the country is clearly getting worse. It was only in December 2015 that Saudi women finally got the right to vote and to run for office – and even then only in municipal elections” Willy Fautré, director of Human Rights Without Frontiers remarked in his reaction to the shocking lip service operation.

Furthermore, Human Rights Watch highlights that women “may be required to provide guardian consent in order to work or access healthcare” they continue on saying “Women regularly face difficulty conducting a range of transactions without a male relative, from renting an apartment to filing legal claims.”

Activist Loujain al-Hathoul, who was jailed in 2014 for driving in Saudi Arabia, told The Washington Post that her concern with events, such as the meetings with Ivanka Trump, “is that they show these women as powerful and making an impact, making a change. But in real life, they’ve been giving these opportunities by the men. They did not fight for them.” [4]

The criticism for this illegitimate effort has been heard from on both sides of the talks. In the U.S. Ivanka Trump has been criticized for paying lip service to issues women face while failing to influence her father to take real action on policies such as affordable child care. Some Saudi activists have also criticized Ivanka Trump and the women she met with for not doing enough to address some of the serious issues that women face in Saudi Arabia.

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