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Tolerance as National Policy

The UAE, the Document on Human Fraternity and the Laws on Discrimination, Hatred and Houses of Worship, 2015 to 2026

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Abstract

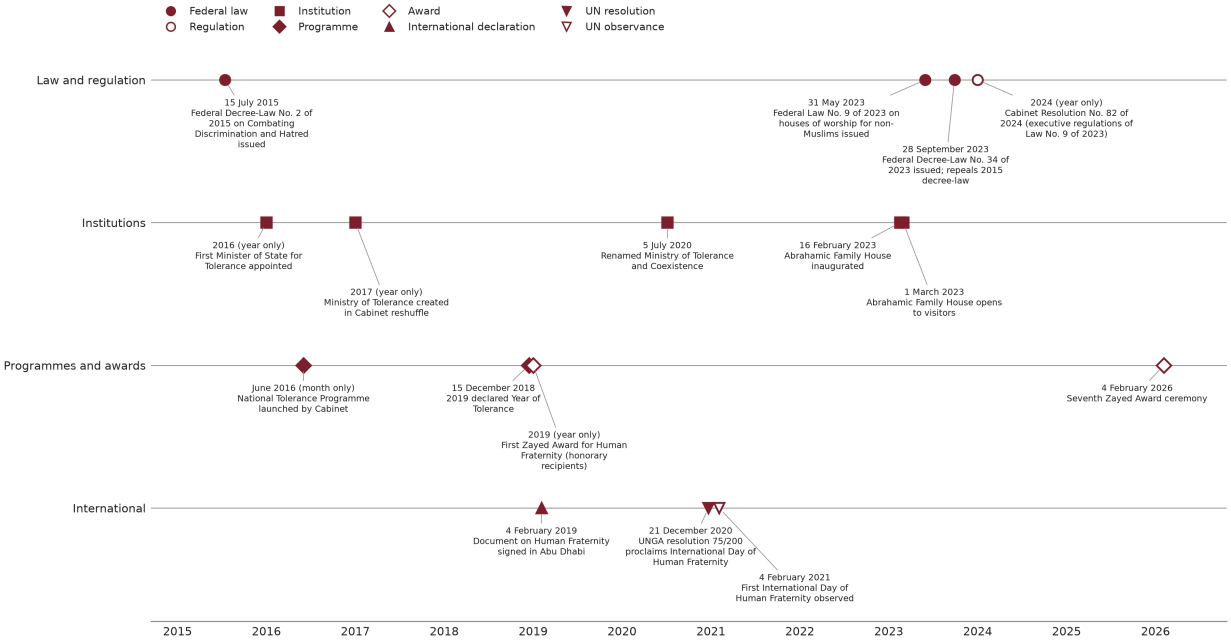
Since 2015 the UAE has built a body of law, institutions and international diplomacy around tolerance and religious coexistence. The legal base is a federal anti-discrimination law first issued in July 2015 and replaced in September 2023 by Federal Decree-Law No. 34 of 2023 Concerning Combating Discrimination, Hatred and Extremism (UAE 2015; UAE 2023a; Figure 1). A separate federal law of May 2023, Federal Law No. 9 of 2023, regulates houses of worship for non-Muslims (UAE 2023b). A Minister of State for Tolerance was first appointed in 2016, and the portfolio became the Ministry of Tolerance and Coexistence in July 2020 (UAE Government n.d.-a). The international centrepiece is the Document on Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together, signed in Abu Dhabi on 4 February 2019 by the Pope and the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar (Holy See 2019). The UN General Assembly took note of that meeting when it proclaimed 4 February the International Day of Human Fraternity in resolution 75/200 of 21 December 2020 (UN General Assembly 2020). The Abrahamic Family House, a mosque, church and synagogue on one site in Abu Dhabi, opened to visitors on 1 March 2023 and states that it had received 600,000 worshippers and visitors by February 2025 (Abu Dhabi Media Office 2023; WAM 2025). This paper sets out what each instrument says and where the public record runs thin. It does not cover the Abraham Accords or trade with Israel (EPIC paper 032) or the UAE's designation of the Muslim Brotherhood (EPIC paper 030).

Keywords: UAE; tolerance; Document on Human Fraternity; International Day of Human Fraternity; Federal Decree-Law No. 34 of 2023; discrimination; hatred; houses of worship; Ministry of Tolerance and Coexistence; Abrahamic Family House; Zayed Award for Human Fraternity

1. Scope, sources and method

The paper covers federal law, federal programmes, the Document on Human Fraternity and the institutions linked to it. Sources are primary and official wherever possible: the texts of the laws, the Holy See's published text of the Document, the UN resolution, the UAE Government portal and releases from Abu Dhabi and federal media offices. Where a statement is the UAE Government's own description of its policy, the paper says so.

Figure 1. UAE tolerance policy instruments, July 2015 to February 2026



Year-only and month-only dates are plotted at the start of the period and labelled as such. Markers show the instrument type.
Federal laws are dated by issue; the 2015 decree-law was repealed by Federal Decree-Law No. 34 of 2023.
Federal Law No. 9 of 2023 came into force six months after its publication in the Official Gazette (UAE 2023b, art 33).
Sources: UAE 2015; UAE 2023a, arts 25–26; UAE 2023b; Abu Dhabi DCD n.d.-b; UAE Government n.d.-a, n.d.-c, n.d.-d; Holy See 2019; UN General Assembly 2020, para 1; United Nations n.d.; Abu Dhabi Media Office 2023; Zayed Award n.d., 2026b.

Figure 1. UAE tolerance policy instruments, July 2015 to February 2026

Religious leaders are referred to by office. Personal names appear only where they form part of an official title, such as the names of the three houses of worship at the Abrahamic Family House and the Zayed Award for Human Fraternity.

Two limits apply. English texts of UAE laws used here are official or ministry translations, and the Arabic text prevails. No official data were found on prosecutions under either anti-discrimination law, or on the number of licensed non-Muslim houses of worship, so the paper describes how the law is designed and cannot measure how it is enforced.

2. The Document on Human Fraternity

The Holy See publishes the English text of the Document on Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together, signed in Abu Dhabi on 4 February 2019 (Holy See 2019). The signatories speak for "Al-Azhar al-Sharif and the Muslims of the East and West, together with the Catholic Church and the Catholics of the East and West" (Holy See 2019). The Document calls on its signatories, world leaders and "the architects of international policy and world economy" to "spread the culture of tolerance and of living together in peace" (Holy See 2019).

Two passages speak directly to national policy. The Document states that "[t]he concept of citizenship is based on the equality of rights and duties", and it calls for "full citizenship" and the rejection of "the discriminatory use of the term minorities" (Holy See 2019). It also invokes freedom as a gift that God has given to all human beings (Holy See 2019).

The Document is a declaration by religious authorities and carries no legal force in the UAE. Its influence shows instead in institutions that name it as their inspiration. The Abu Dhabi Media Office describes the Abrahamic Family House as "inspired by the principles in the Document on Human Fraternity" (Abu Dhabi Media Office 2023).

3. The UN International Day of Human Fraternity

UN General Assembly resolution 75/200 was adopted at the 47th plenary meeting on 21 December 2020 (UN General Assembly 2020). It "decides to proclaim 4 February as the International Day of Human Fraternity, to be observed each year beginning in 2021" (UN General Assembly 2020, para 1). In its preamble it takes note of the meeting between the Pope and the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar on 4 February 2019 in Abu Dhabi, "which resulted in the signing of the document entitled 'Human fraternity for world peace and living together'" (UN General Assembly 2020). Observance is to be funded "exclusively by voluntary contributions" (UN General Assembly 2020, para 2).

The UN's observance page records that the first observance in 2021 was organised by the UN Alliance of Civilizations with the Permanent Missions of Egypt and the UAE and the Higher Committee of Human Fraternity (United Nations n.d.).

4. Federal law

4.1 Federal Decree-Law No. 2 of 2015

Federal Decree-Law No. 2 of 2015 on Combating Discrimination and Hatred was issued on 15 July 2015 (UAE 2015). It made discrimination and hate speech, by any means of expression, criminal offences. In the Ministry of Justice English translation, both carried imprisonment of not less than five years and a fine of AED 500,000 to AED 1 million, or either penalty (UAE 2015, arts 6 and 7). The translation is of the text as issued. Federal Decree-Law No. 11 of 2019 later replaced the law's definition of discrimination; the penalties in articles 6 and 7 were not amended (UAE 2019).

4.2 Federal Decree-Law No. 34 of 2023

Federal Decree-Law No. 34 of 2023 Concerning Combating Discrimination, Hatred and Extremism was issued on 28 September 2023 and repeals the 2015 decree-law (UAE 2023a, art 25 and signature block). It was to come into force one month after publication in the Official Gazette (UAE 2023a, art 26). It was published in Official Gazette No. 760 on 29 September 2023 and took effect on 29 October 2023 (UAE Legislation n.d.). The UAE Government portal confirms that the 2015 law was "replaced later by Federal Law by Decree No (34) of 2023" (UAE Government n.d.-c).

The 2023 law defines religions as "the Heavenly Religions, Islam, Christianity, and Judaism" and houses of worship as "Mosques, Churches and Temples" (UAE 2023a, art 1). It defines discrimination as any distinction, restriction, exclusion or preference "on the basis of religion, creed, sect, sect [sic], race, colour, ethnic origin, gender or sex, taking into account the laws in

force in the State" (UAE 2023a, art 1). The 2015 decree-law defined discrimination by reference to "religion, creed, doctrine, sect, caste, race, colour or ethnic origin" (UAE 2015, art 1). Gender and sex were added to that definition by Federal Decree-Law No. 11 of 2019, and the 2023 law keeps them (UAE 2019).

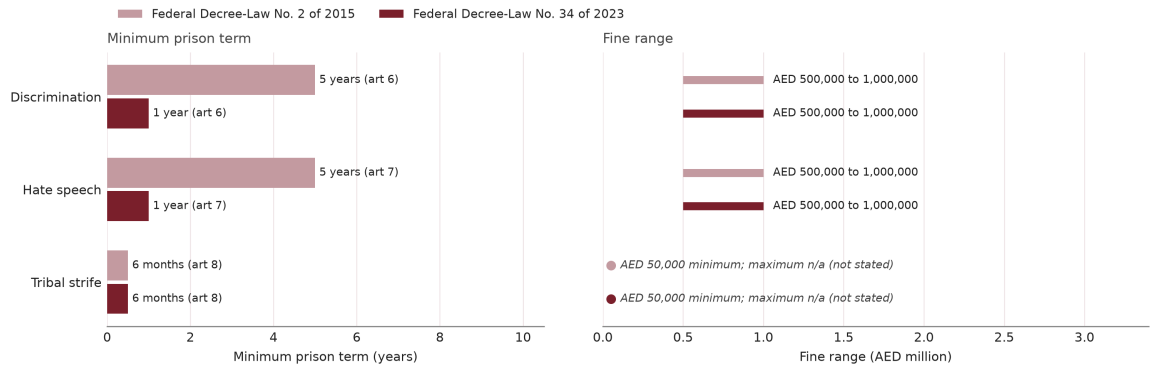
The principal penalties in the 2023 law are:

- discrimination by any means of expression: imprisonment of not less than one year and a fine of AED 500,000 to AED 1 million (art 6);
- inciting hate speech: imprisonment of not less than one year and a fine of AED 500,000 to AED 1 million, or either penalty (art 7);
- inciting tribal strife: imprisonment of not less than six months and a fine of not less than AED 50,000, or either penalty (art 8);
- establishing or managing an organisation for blasphemy, discrimination or hate speech: imprisonment of not less than ten years (art 13) (UAE 2023a).

The 2023 law also adds "extremism" to its title and defines it as action motivated by ideas or principles "that would disrupt public order, or would express blasphemy, discriminate, or incite hate speech" (UAE 2023a, art 1). Article 24 states that advantages granted by other legislation to women, children, people with disabilities and the elderly are not prohibited discrimination (UAE 2023a).

On the published English texts, the minimum prison term for discrimination and for hate speech fell from five years in 2015 to one year in 2023, while the fine ranges were left unchanged (UAE 2015, arts 6 and 7; UAE 2023a, arts 6 and 7; Figure 2). The 2019 amendment did not touch articles 6 and 7.

Figure 2. Minimum prison terms and fine ranges by offence, 2015 and 2023 laws



2015 values are from the text as issued; Federal Decree-Law No. 11 of 2019 amended only the definition of discrimination and left these penalties unchanged.
Tribal strife: neither law states a maximum fine (n/a).
Sources: UAE 2015, arts 6–8; UAE 2019; UAE 2023a, arts 6–8.

Figure 2. Minimum prison terms and fine ranges by offence, 2015 and 2023 laws

4.3 Houses of worship for non-Muslims

Federal Law No. 9 of 2023 concerning the Regulation of Houses of Worship for Non-Muslims was issued on 31 May 2023 and came into force six months after its publication in the Official Gazette (UAE 2023b, art 33). Its stated aims are to "regulate Places and Rooms of Worship in the

State" and to "consolidate the values of tolerance and coexistence" (UAE 2023b, art 2). It applies across the country, free zones included (UAE 2023b, art 3).

A licence to establish a house of worship requires at least 20 founding members, each at least 40 years old (the authority may make exceptions), resident in the UAE for at least five years and holding a recommendation from a parent house of worship (UAE 2023b, art 6). Licences run for up to two years and can be renewed (UAE 2023b, art 11). The law prohibits using a house of worship for activities "aimed at preaching the gospel or calling for one religion, sect, or belief" and prohibits worship and religious rites outside licensed houses of worship (UAE 2023b, art 20). Its executive regulations were issued as Cabinet Resolution No. 82 of 2024 (Abu Dhabi DCD n.d.-b).

In Abu Dhabi the Department of Community Development handles applications through the TAMM platform, with no fee and a service time of 60 working days (Abu Dhabi DCD n.d.-a).

5. Institutions and programmes

5.1 Ministry of Tolerance and Coexistence

The UAE Government states that the post of Minister of State for Tolerance was created in 2016, became the Ministry of Tolerance in a 2017 reshuffle and was renamed the Ministry of Tolerance and Coexistence in July 2020 (UAE Government n.d.-a). Another government page gives the renaming date as 5 July 2020 (UAE Government n.d.-c).

5.2 National Tolerance Programme

The Cabinet launched the National Tolerance Programme in June 2016 (UAE Government n.d.-d). The government lists seven pillars: Islam, the Constitution, Zayed's legacy and the ethics of the UAE, international conventions, archaeology and history, humanity, and common values (UAE Government n.d.-d). It is organised under five themes covering government, family, youth, scientific and cultural content, and international efforts (UAE Government n.d.-d). Named initiatives include Tolerance Week and the UAE Tolerance Centre (UAE Government n.d.-d).

5.3 Year of Tolerance 2019

The then President declared 2019 the Year of Tolerance on 15 December 2018 (UAE Government n.d.-a). The government lists five pillars, including youth education, cultural dialogue and "legislative and policy-oriented objectives" (UAE Government n.d.-a). At a meeting of the Year's Supreme National Committee in October 2019, the Ministry of Culture and Knowledge Development reported 1,500 initiatives implemented during the year, including projects in Mosul to rebuild the Al Nuri Mosque and two churches (MoFAIC 2019).

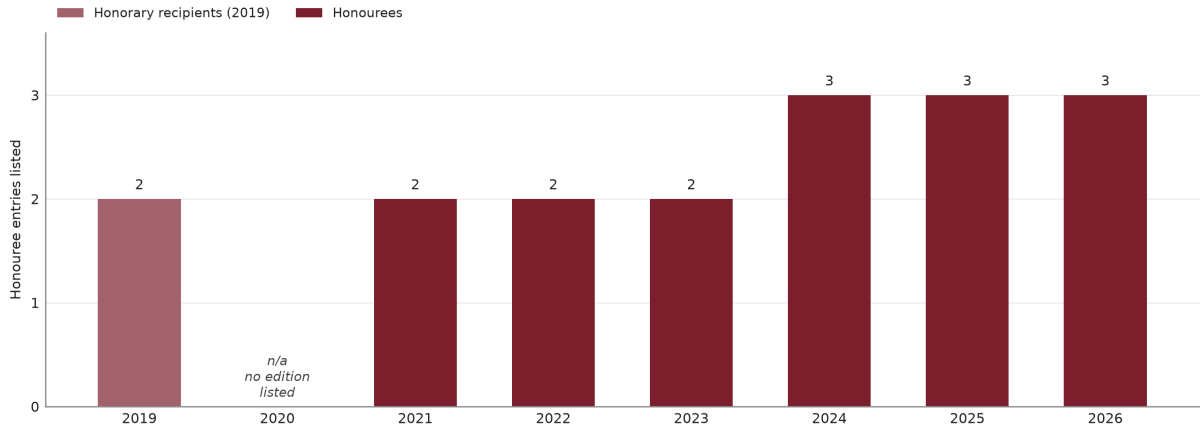
5.4 The Abrahamic Family House

The Abrahamic Family House was inaugurated in February 2023 in the Saadiyat Cultural District of Abu Dhabi and opened to visitors on 1 March 2023 (Abu Dhabi Media Office 2023). It contains three houses of worship, named the Eminence Ahmed El-Tayeb Mosque, His Holiness Francis Church and Moses Ben Maimon Synagogue, with shared spaces for dialogue (Abu Dhabi Media Office 2023). WAM reported on 17 February 2025 that it had welcomed 600,000 worshippers and visitors since opening and hosted "hundreds of community events, talks, and workshops" (WAM 2025). No later official visitor total could be found.

5.5 Zayed Award for Human Fraternity

The Zayed Award for Human Fraternity has held seven editions, in 2019 and each year from 2021 to 2026 (Zayed Award n.d.; Figure 3). Its 2026 ceremony, the seventh edition, was held at the Founder's Memorial in Abu Dhabi on 4 February 2026 (Zayed Award 2026b). The award states that from 2019 to 2025 it honoured "19 recipients from 19 countries", with the Pope and the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar as honorary recipients in 2019 (Zayed Award 2026a). The 2026 honourees were the peace agreement between Armenia and Azerbaijan, an Afghan advocate for girls' education and a Palestinian welfare organisation (Zayed Award n.d.; Zayed Award 2026b). The award's recipients page lists editions for 2019 and 2021 to 2026 and no 2020 edition (Zayed Award n.d.).

Figure 3. Zayed Award for Human Fraternity: honouree entries listed per edition, 2019 to 2026



Entries as listed on the award's recipients page; joint honourees (the King and Queen of Jordan, 2022; Nahdlatul Ulama and Muhammadiyah, 2024) count as one entry each.
The award's own list for 2019 to 2025 names 16 honourees under the heading '19 recipients from 19 countries'; the source does not explain the figure of 19.
No 2020 edition is listed (n/a).
Sources: Zayed Award n.d.; Zayed Award 2026a, 2026b.

Figure 3. Zayed Award for Human Fraternity: honouree entries listed per edition, 2019 to 2026

6. Assessment

UAE tolerance policy has a domestic legal side and an international diplomatic side, which official sources present as a single policy. Both rest on published texts.

The legal side protects religion and religious groups strongly and frames tolerance as a matter of public order. The 2023 law's definition of religions names only Islam, Christianity and Judaism, while its definition of discrimination covers "religion, creed, sect" more broadly (UAE 2023a, art 1). The worship law licenses houses of worship for "religions, sects, and beliefs" as determined by a committee, which gives a route for other faiths, and restricts proselytising and worship outside licensed premises (UAE 2023b, arts 1, 6 and 20). The 2023 law's extremism provisions limit expression, which some readers will see as a cost to free speech; the law itself states that freedom of opinion cannot justify statements that incite contempt of religions (UAE 2023a, art 3; UAE Government n.d.-b).

On the diplomatic side, formal recognition has followed. A UN observance day refers by name to the Abu Dhabi meeting, and the Zayed Award links that date to an annual ceremony. These measure recognition and say nothing about outcomes inside the UAE.

The biggest gap is data. No official series was found on prosecutions under the 2015 or 2023 law, the number of licensed non-Muslim houses of worship under the 2023 worship law, or Abrahamic Family House visitor numbers after February 2025.

7. Policy implications

1. **Publish enforcement data.** Annual counts of cases and convictions under Federal Decree-Law No. 34 of 2023 would allow its effect to be assessed.
2. **Publish the worship register.** Federal Law No. 9 of 2023 creates a register and requires local authorities to report to the ministry (UAE 2023b, arts 5 and 23). A public summary by emirate and faith would show how licensing works in practice. Article 23(2) requires the staff of the competent authorities to keep these data, information and reports confidential (UAE 2023b, art 23(2)), so publication would need a change to the law or an aggregate exception.
3. **Clarify the definitions.** The difference between the narrow definition of religions and the wider scope of the discrimination offence could be settled in guidance.
4. **Report programme outcomes.** The Year of Tolerance reported a count of initiatives. Future reporting on the National Tolerance Programme could add measures of outcome.

8. Limitations

Law texts are English translations. The Abrahamic Family House visitor figure is cumulative to February 2025. The paper does not assess how foreign governments or religious bodies receive UAE tolerance policy, and makes no claims about enforcement.

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Dated source log

Date checked	Key	Route	Status
	Holy See 2019	Opened	Retrieved

Date checked	Key	Route	Status
31 Oct 2026			
31 Oct 2026	UN General Assembly 2020	Opened (UN Digital Library PDF)	Retrieved
31 Oct 2026	United Nations n.d.	Opened	Retrieved
31 Oct 2026	UAE 2015	Archived copy (Internet Archive); live link unavailable	Retrieved; English translation
31 Oct 2026	UAE 2019	Opened (Dubai Judicial Institute Arabic consolidated text)	Retrieved; Arabic text as amended by Federal Decree-Law No. 11 of 2019
31 Oct 2026	UAE 2023a	Archived copy (Internet Archive); live link unavailable	Retrieved; English translation
31 Oct 2026	UAE Legislation n.d.	Archived copy (Internet Archive); live link unavailable	Retrieved; Official Gazette No. 760, 29 Sep 2023; effective 29 Oct 2023
31 Oct 2026	UAE 2023b	Opened (Abu Dhabi DCD)	Retrieved; English translation
31 Oct 2026	Abu Dhabi DCD n.d.-a	Opened	Retrieved
31 Oct 2026	Abu Dhabi DCD n.d.-b	Opened	Retrieved; lists Cabinet Resolution No. (82) of 2024
31 Oct 2026	UAE Government n.d.-a	Opened	Retrieved
31 Oct 2026	UAE Government n.d.-b	Opened	Retrieved
31 Oct 2026	UAE Government n.d.-c	Opened	Retrieved
31 Oct 2026	UAE Government n.d.-d	Opened	Retrieved
31 Oct 2026	MoFAIC 2019	Opened	Retrieved; page dated 18 Oct 2019
31 Oct 2026	Abu Dhabi Media Office 2023	Opened	Retrieved; release dated 17 Feb 2023
31 Oct 2026	WAM 2025	Archived copy (Internet Archive); live link unavailable	Retrieved; dated 17 Feb 2025
31 Oct 2026	Zayed Award n.d.	Opened	Retrieved
31 Oct 2026	Zayed Award 2026a	Opened	Retrieved
31 Oct 2026	Zayed Award 2026b	Opened	Retrieved

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