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Moral Authenticity, Interfaith Dialogue, and Soft Power in the UAE

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ABSTRACT

This paper traces the evolution of the United Arab Emirates' strong public emphasis on interfaith dialogue from the pragmatic bestowal of rights for workers and guests to a consciously articulated doctrine of coexistence. It argues that while the UAE's initiatives in tolerance and religious coexistence arise from authentic Islamic and ethical convictions, they also function as deliberate instruments of soft power serving three overlapping purposes: consolidating domestic cohesion within a multi-faith society, enhancing the country's global reputation and tourism appeal, and strengthening international partnerships. Drawing on official policy statements, government programs, and academic literature, the paper demonstrates that the UAE's model of institutionalized tolerance represents a synthesis of conviction and calculation rather than a contradiction between them. It contends that moral sincerity and strategic interest reinforce one another and produce a distinctive form of moral statecraft.

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Introduction

Among the Arab states of the Gulf, the United Arab Emirates has most deliberately transformed religious ethics into the grammar of diplomacy. In a little over fifty years, it has made tolerance, meaning the willingness to live respectfully with difference, the centerpiece of its identity. From the 2019 papal visit and the Document on Human Fraternity to the creation of the Abrahamic Family House and the BAPS Hindu Mandir, the UAE has woven interfaith coexistence into its laws, institutions, and international image projection. These developments are not isolated gestures but expressions of a consistent philosophy of governance that treats coexistence and religious inclusiveness as both a moral necessity and an instrument of global engagement.

The intellectual foundations of this transformation lie in the vision of Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahyan, the federation's founding father. His maxim that "religion is for God and the nation is for all" became the moral charter of the new state. Sheikh Zayed frequently cited the Qurʾānic verse "O mankind, We created you into nations and tribes so that you may know one another" (Sūrah al-Ḥujurāt 49:13) as a divine endorsement of tolerant coexistence and respect. He viewed Islam as a universal ethical framework grounded in mercy (raḥma) and justice (ʿadl), and not as a narrow and exclusive doctrine. Fanaticism, intolerance or religious exclusion, he warned, contradicts the path of the Prophet, whose life exemplified forbearance toward other communities with different religious views but a desire for peace with his own religiously-based polity.

When the UAE emerged in 1971, its demographic and cultural landscape was already very diverse. Oil-driven development had drawn workers and traders from South Asia, Iran, East Africa and elsewhere, while British administrative personnel and Christian missionaries added to the social mosaic. Sheikh Zayed realized that unity could not rest on a drive towards uniformity, but required a civic commitment to respect. Under his leadership, Abu Dhabi granted land for Christian churches and the UAE permitted Christian instruction in private schools which served expatriate communities. These measures served immediate social needs yet also expressed a theological conviction: that Islamic sovereignty entails moral stewardship over all peoples within a country.

In public speeches, Sheikh Zayed linked Islam's universality to coexistence, famously insisting that "to treat every person, no matter what his creed or race, as a special soul, is a mark of Islam." Similarly, speaking of the UAE's position on coexistence with non-Muslims, he said that "it is a purely human line based on love and tolerance. We have a duty towards humanity, we cooperate with it, we deal with it as human beings, we respect them as human beings, and we embrace them as much as they promise us of friendship and affection." His outlook echoed classical scholars such as al-Rāzī and al-Ghazālī, who read the Qurʾān's references to human diversity as signs of divine wisdom rather than reasons for division. For Sheikh Zayed, the legitimacy of rule derived not from strictness and exclusion but from magnanimity and inclusion.

This outlook was both moral and strategic. The rapid influx of expatriates transformed Emirati cities and towns into cosmopolitan enclaves where Indians, Pakistanis, Iranians, Filipinos and others lived alongside local Emirati Arabs. Rather than acting with an Islamic daʿwa (call to conversion) imperative or enforcing cultural assimilation, Sheikh Zayed encouraged Arab hospitality as the essence of national character. He understood that social peace and economic productivity depended on cooperation and goodwill among communities. In this sense, tolerance and its subset of religious liberties became instrument of stability, ensuring that the new federation could harness religious and other cultural differences as a strength rather than as a source of conflict.

By the 2010s, this philosophy had matured into a recognizable social ethos. UAE officials and UAE-backed forums repeatedly invoked the Prophet's Ṣaḥīfat al-Madīna (Charter of Medina), and sometimes the Christians of Najran episode, as precedents for tolerant coexistence. These references positioned tolerance within Islamic authenticity, not Western imitation. At the same time, the government's pragmatic approach to religious pluralism won praise from international observers. This philosophy had become a visible social ethos in Abu Dhabi's urban landscape, where mosques stand alongside officially recognized churches and, now, a Hindu temple and a synagogue. Visiting diplomats have highlighted these sites, and Emirati leaders routinely frame such coexistence as a humanity-centered expression of Islam, often invoking Sheikh Zayed's aforementioned insistence that "to treat every person… as a special soul is a mark of Islam."

Historical and Ideational Foundations

Sheikh Zayed's philosophy of rule fused Arabian and Bedouin generosity with Qurʾānic stewardship and presented governance as an amāna (a moral trust) that extended protection to all residents. In practice, Abu Dhabi under his leadership facilitated recognized worship spaces for expatriate communities: St Andrew's Anglican church was inaugurated in 1968 and the Catholic St. Joseph's parish moved to a new site by Zayed's instruction in 1977. In Dubai, under its own ruler, Hindu merchants received permission in 1958 to (re)build a temple in Bur Dubai.

Article 7 of the UAE Constitution, which was "provisional" from 1971 before becoming permanent in 1996, states that Islam is the country's official religion.

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The Constitution further commits the UAE Government to equip citizens "for a dignified and free constitutional life while going ahead towards a full-fledged representative democratic regime in an Islamic and Arab community free of fear and anxiety." Yet, steadfastly rejecting the notion of ideologized politics, the UAE has a foreign policy and supporting diplomatic strategies and practices that make little direct reference (let alone contain any prescriptive subordination) to theology. Article 12 of the UAE Constitution states that, while the UAE's foreign policy supports "Arab and Islamic causes and interests," the country is committed to "establishing closer friendship and co-operation with all the nations and peoples on the basis of the principles of the charter of the United Nations Organization and international ideals."

The UAE certainly does not force Islam into a political mold, let alone advance an Islamic daʿwa agenda when it reaches out diplomatically to the world. Indeed, it considers such efforts to be unhelpful and extreme distortions of Islam. Seeing the harm brought globally by Islamism, it rejects the notion that any politicized ideology should determine its foreign policy. Instead, understanding that all states have rights, including the right to choose their own religions or none, the UAE seeks to build international friendship with states that similarly pursue security, stability, prosperity and tolerance and that share its values. In its diplomacy it prioritizes inter-religious tolerance, peaceful coexistence, mutual respect, non-interference, and a strong commitment to international law. It sees these as core Islamic values, and ideal human values, and strongly ensures that its diplomacy places the weight of emphasis on human dignity (karāma), justice (ʿadāla), and goodwill (ḥusn al-niyya). The UAE uses these values, and not any theological agenda, to provide the best means possible for its diplomats to enhance human fellowship, strengthen cooperation, create mutual benefit, and resolve disagreement through dialogue.

In its internal affairs, the UAE advances Islam as the religion of its citizens, and, as Article 7 of the Constitution states, "The Islamic shariʿa [that is, Islamic Law] is a main source of legislation". The Government provides religious guidance, jurisprudential clarifications and the distribution of endowments through the Abu Dhabi-based al-ʾAwqāf, the General Authority Of Islamic Affairs, Endowments and Zakat, with Dubai having its own Islamic Affairs and Charitable Activities Department. The Federal Government and the government of each of the seven emirates ensure that every village, town and urban suburb has at least one mosque with sufficient capacity, along with imams and copies of the Holy Qur'ān. The al-ʾAwqāf provides the weekly sermons for imams to preach during Ṣalāh al-Jumuʿa (the Friday congregational prayers), with the content promoting what the Government, which remains committed to fighting radicalized forms of the religion, sees as a theologically sound, moderate, inclusive and non-politicized Islam.

Moreover, the UAE recognizes that very many residents are non-Muslims. Indeed, its residents include people from almost every country and creed. It thus accords significant religious freedom as a foundational principle. Article 32 of the Constitution states: "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." The latter phrase (violation of the public morals) primarily means that proselytization and insulting Islamic tenets and personages, especially the Holy Prophet Muḥammad, and leaving Islam in any public fashion, are prohibited. The country otherwise permits more religious freedom than any other Islamic country, and has supported the building of places of worship for a wide range of religions, including faiths within the Abrahamic tradition (Judaism and Christianity) and faiths outside that monotheistic tradition, such as Hinduism and Sikhism.

By the mid-1980s, as the expatriate population grew dramatically, the leadership faced the challenge of preserving cohesion in a society where citizens were already a minority. Sheikh Zayed's solution lay not in restricting diversity but in cultivating shared civic values. Schools promoted themes of hospitality, cooperation, and mutual respect and Friday sermons in mosques warned against prejudice. These initiatives created what sociologist Abdulkhaleq Abdulla later called a consistent moderate ideology and a distinctive fusion of faith and pragmatism that stabilized the federation's social fabric.

The increasing presence of global institutions and tourists in the UAE reinforced this perception. Expo exhibitions, international conferences, sporting tournaments, and university campuses highlighted the country's openness as a comparative advantage. At the same time, a growing focus on religious freedoms and dialogue functioned as soft power. By presenting itself as a beacon of moderation amid regional turbulence, the UAE gained diplomatic capital and attracted international partnerships. In other words, moral credibility became a source of attraction.

This historical trajectory contradicts the notion that Emirati tolerance is a recent branding exercise. It predates the post-9/11 discourse that cast moderation as a counterterrorist strategy, although in the wake of 9/11 it became necessary to present Islam with a positive face. The UAE's inclusive practices actually emerged decades earlier from a local synthesis of Islamic humanism and pragmatic governance. The continuity of these ideals across two generations of leadership (Zayed, Khalifa bin

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Zayed, and Mohammed bin Zayed) suggests authenticity rather than opportunism.

As the federation entered the 2010s, tolerance acquired institutional form. In 2015, the UAE enacted Federal Decree Law No. (2) Anti-Discrimination and Anti-Hatred Law and, in 2016, launched a National Tolerance Programme and a ministerial portfolio. In 2019's "Year of Tolerance," the government set five pillars (including a legislative/policy pillar) to embed coexistence. Officials described harmonious diversity as a national value tied to development and prosperity, which prepared the ground for the formal policies that followed.

Institutionalization of Tolerance and the Formation of a Moral Statecraft

The formalization of the UAE's ethic of coexistence began in the mid-2010s, when tolerance shifted from cultural norm to explicit policy. The leadership recognized that what had once been practiced informally could serve as a model of governance for a society that was among the most demographically diverse in the world. The central objective was to transform the moral impulses of the founding era into a durable institutional framework.

The aforementioned Anti-Discrimination and Anti-Hatred Law was one of the region's early comprehensive federal statutes prohibiting incitement and discrimination on the basis of religion, sect, belief, race, color, or ethnic origin. Officials framed harmonious coexistence as a national interest in subsequent policy statements, and the law's provisions criminalize religious contempt and hate speech. The law was interpreted domestically as a juridical expression of the Qurʾānic command to "speak words of goodness" (Sūrah al-Baqarah 2:83). Critics abroad described it as a restriction on expression, but within the UAE it was presented as the best means of protecting the dignity of all communities. The measure symbolized a new phase: the codification of moral values into enforceable norms.

The Ministry of Tolerance (now the Ministry of Tolerance and Coexistence) emerged in February 2016 and collaborates with the United Nations Alliance of Civilizations, UNESCO, and a range of faith-based NGOs to promote a set of ideas that emphasize empathy and shared humanity. In June that year, the UAE Cabinet approved the National Programme for Tolerance, built on seven pillars (Islam, the UAE Constitution; Zayed's legacy and the ethics of the UAE; international conventions; archaeology and history; humanity; and common values) and implemented the programme across five themes, including strengthening the government's role as an "incubator" of tolerance and promoting tolerance among youth and steering them away from extremism. Subsequent initiatives (including the National Festival of Tolerance, teacher-facing moral/tolerance education efforts, and youth exchange/leadership programmes) operationalized these goals.

In the same period, Dubai Law No. 9 of 2017 founded the International Institute for Tolerance as a think tank and outreach platform. Together with the Hedayah Center (December 2012), which counters violent extremism, and the Sawab Center (July 2015), which counters the narratives and propaganda of radical groups, it formed a triadic network linking interfaith dialogue to counter-extremism and civic education. The UAE believes that these institutions represent the fusion of moral and security policies. Official white papers describe tolerance as "a national security strategy," an insight reflecting the belief that ideological harmony is the surest defense against radicalization. Rather than divorcing ethics from power, the UAE sought to integrate ethics; the preservation of virtue became indistinguishable from the preservation of order.

The government's efforts culminated in naming 2019 the Year of Tolerance, which elevated domestic values to international diplomacy. That February, Pope Francis and Grand Imam Ahmed al-Tayeb of Al-Azhar University, considered the world's premier center for Arabic literature and Sunni Islamic learning, jointly signed the Document on Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together in Abu Dhabi. This was the first such encounter between a Pontiff and a leading Muslim scholar on Arabian soil. The document's assertion that religious diversity is "willed by God in His wisdom" echoed centuries of interpretation within Islamic theology, granting the initiative legitimacy across traditions. The papal mass that followed, attended by more than 100,000 people at Zayed Sports City, offered an unprecedented image of Christian-Muslim solidarity under Muslim rule. For the UAE, the event demonstrated that Islam's confidence allows openness and engagement, not narrowness and isolation. In other words, it positioned itself internationally as a moral interlocutor in an era of polarization.

Abu Dhabi consolidated this momentum by creating the Higher Committee of Human Fraternity, comprising Christian, Muslim, and Jewish figures charged with advancing the document's aims. The committee administers the Zayed Award for Human Fraternity, an annual one-million-dollar prize recognizing individuals and organizations promoting coexistence. Honorees have included UN Secretary-General António Guterres (2021) and organizations with major work in Africa such as the Magdi Yacoub Heart Foundation (2024) and the Community of Sant'Egidio (2023), thus extending the

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UAE's moral influence into global humanitarian networks. The state's commitment to fund and host such bodies indicates a sincerity that goes beyond public relations: it demonstrates the pursuit of virtue through tangible activities and infrastructure.

In 2023 the Abrahamic Family House, designed by David Adjaye, gave architectural permanence to these ideals. Comprising a mosque, a church, and a synagogue of equal height arranged around a shared courtyard, the complex symbolizes the UAE's belief in the concept of unity through safe and harmonious diversity. Its creators intended its symmetry and openness to evoke the theological equality of revelation central to the Abrahamic tradition. The project's completion under government patronage confirmed that religious coexistence had become a cornerstone of Emirati identity.

The UAE has extended the same logic of inclusivity to some non-Abrahamic faiths. The BAPS Hindu Mandir, inaugurated in 2024 on land donated by the government, celebrates the contribution of the Indian diaspora while strengthening diplomatic relations with India. The ceremony, attended by Emirati and Indian leaders, illustrated how interfaith initiatives simultaneously serve domestic integration and foreign-policy outreach. Through such projects, the UAE presents itself as a microcosm of global harmony; as a polity where multiple civilizations interact peacefully under the soft hand of Islamic leadership.

Some scholars describe the UAE's tolerance agenda as a value-based project that fuses ethics and security to sustain regime legitimacy. Elizabeth Monier argues that the UAE has incorporated religious tolerance into a "value-based program of nation building" and soft-power statecraft aimed at enhancing the state's cultural attractiveness and sustaining the power of Gulf regimes beyond rentier bargains. She notes rulers' "concerted efforts … to build up political legitimacy," including the pursuit of "moral or cultural legitimacy." In parallel, John Fahy situates Gulf "tolerance, moderation and interfaith dialogue" as post-9/11 initiatives linked to counter-extremism and international positioning. In comparative politics, this is often framed as performance legitimacy (authority based on moral or welfare outcomes), and attributed to Weber, although that term is not his; it comes from later theorists of authoritarian stability. In the Emirati case, legitimacy arises from the experience of security, prosperity, and respect rather than electoral representation. Moral statecraft, therefore, functions as both a domestic contract and a tool of external reputation.

Critics, particularly from human-rights organizations, contend that this moral diplomacy masks restrictions on political expression. Yet the durability and consistency of the UAE's initiatives challenge the notion of mere image management. Over half a century, tolerance has evolved from Sheikh Zayed's personal ethos into a comprehensive system of law, education, and international engagement. Within the federation's communitarian framework, freedom is conceived not as adversarial politics but as social harmony secured by justice. The repeated and costly demonstration of these values (including legal reform, interfaith infrastructure, and international conferences) constitutes evidence of genuine conviction.

By converting an ethical tradition into statecraft, the UAE has created a distinctive model of governance in which virtue and interest are mutually reinforcing. Tolerance functions simultaneously as moral creed and strategic capital, linking domestic unity with global prestige. The following section will analyze how this synthesis operates across three interrelated arenas (international diplomacy, internal social cohesion, and cultural-economic development) to show that the UAE's interfaith engagement is both sincerely grounded and pragmatically effective.

Interfaith Dialogue as Soft Power and Global Partnership Building

The UAE's commitment to interfaith dialogue has evolved into a sophisticated form of soft power, functioning as both a moral narrative and a diplomatic tool. While rooted in authentic religious and ethical principles, the country's emphasis on coexistence also enables it to project influence through the attractiveness of its positions and practices. Joseph Nye defined soft power as the ability of a state to achieve desired outcomes "because others admire its values, emulate its example, or aspire to its level of prosperity and openness." The UAE's consistent presentation of itself as a model of moderation exemplifies this principle. In a region often portrayed as unstable and intolerant, the UAE wants its image as a cultural bridge between different peoples to amplify its international standing.

From a foreign-policy perspective, interfaith dialogue functions as an instrument for relationship-building with diverse global partners. By emphasizing universal moral values, the UAE broadens the basis of engagement beyond oil and security to include culture, religion, and shared humanity. The most conspicuous example of this is the country's partnership with the Vatican, which culminated in the papal visit of 2019. Hosting Pope Francis and the Grand Imam of al-Azhar University for the signing of the Document on Human Fraternity

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demonstrated an ability to convene moral authority at a global level. The UAE positioned itself as a "neutral ground" for dialogue between faiths with the goal of reinforcing its role as a mediator and moral interlocutor in a polarized world.

Diplomatic analysts note that this initiative complemented the country's broader strategy of "humanitarian diplomacy." The UAE has consistently ranked among the top global donors of foreign aid per capita, contributing to humanitarian relief in more than 130 countries. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation explicitly links these efforts to the ethics of Islamic compassion, echoing Sheikh Zayed's dictum that "money is worthless if it isn't used for the benefit of people." By aligning material generosity with moral identity, the Emirates cultivates goodwill that translates into political capital and international legitimacy.

The Abraham Accords of 2020, which dramatically normalized relations with Israel, provide another manifestation of this moral diplomacy. The UAE justified the agreement not in narrow geopolitical terms but as a step toward promoting regional peace and cooperation: "we provided our region with a valuable opportunity to break through the stalemate, move stagnant waters, and chart paths that lead to peace, security, coexistence and devotion to development." The accompanying rhetoric of interfaith cooperation reframed normalization as reconciliation, rather than as political alliance or religious syncretism. While the UAE's geopolitical motives (such as security, technology, and trade) were cardinal, its moral narrative of religious kinship seeks to provide a powerful legitimizing frame both domestically and abroad.

Critics in parts of the Arab and wider Islamic world accused the UAE of exploiting religion to cloak what they saw as the worst type of political expediency. Yet the subsequent establishment of the Abrahamic Family House and active Emirati participation in regional dialogue with Jewish organizations suggests a sustained rather than opportunistic commitment to a model of harmonious coexistence based on theological, notably Abrahamic, ideals and discourse.

At the institutional level, the UAE's interfaith dialogue has diversified its foreign partnerships. Cooperation with the UNESCO Interfaith Dialogue Program, the KAICIID Dialogue Centre (headquartered in Lisbon, Portugal), and the UN Alliance of Civilizations situates the Emirates within a global network of normative diplomacy. The World Tolerance Summit in Dubai, which the UAE has organized annually since 2018, attracts religious leaders, diplomats, and academics from more than fifty nations. By providing a platform for diverse participants under the auspices of a Muslim-majority state, the UAE seeks to demonstrate that Islam and religious diversity can coexist constructively. It believes that the symbolism of hosting these gatherings in an Arab capital will not be lost on international audiences accustomed to associating the region with conflict.

From a theoretical perspective, the UAE's approach illustrates what Nicholas Cull calls public diplomacy through advocacy and values-based storytelling. Rather than promoting ideology, the Emirates communicates virtue. The moral language of coexistence serves as a universal medium transcending politics. Emirati embassies incorporate themes of tolerance and interfaith cooperation in cultural exhibitions, scholarship programs, and public events. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs maintains a dedicated Office of Public and Cultural Diplomacy (OPCD), which is responsible for projecting the nation's values abroad. In its outward-facing publicity, the ministry says cultural and public diplomacy includes "the exchange of ideas, art and language" and support "dialogue, education … in the service of improved mutual respect, international collaboration and global prosperity. … In effect, the values of tolerance, religious freedom and mutual respect championed by Sheikh Zayed are ingrained in the UAE's DNA."

This moral framing enhances the UAE's attractiveness as a regional partner. Western states view it as a stable and moderate ally, while Asian powers appreciate its acceptance of ethnic, cultural and religious diversity as a foundation for inclusive trade and labor relations. The Anwar Gargash Diplomatic Academy (formerly the Emirates Diplomatic Academy) trains future diplomats to articulate tolerance as both principle and policy. In effect, interfaith dialogue becomes a skill of statecraft; that is, as an element of diplomatic literacy necessary to manage relations in a diverse world.

The strategy also supports the UAE's ambition to host international events that symbolize global unity. Expo 2020 Dubai, which was postponed to October 2021–March 2022 because of the COVID pandemic, embodied the theme "Connecting Minds, Creating the Future," a theme organized around Opportunity, Mobility, and Sustainability. While "tolerance" was not an official subtheme, Expo programming featured a Tolerance & Inclusivity Week and related initiatives which underscored the UAE's coexistence messaging. Programming and special spaces (including the Holy See pavilion and the Women's Pavilion) showcased culture, diversity, and faith-related content. The event drew over

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24 million visits. UN officials described the Expo as a platform to advance its Sustainable Development Goals, a set of 17 global objectives adopted by all United Nations member states in 2015 as part of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Together, the juxtaposition of technology, art, and interfaith-focused programming illustrates the Emirates' attempt to integrate moral and modern narratives into a single brand of national identity.

Another dimension of soft power lies in the UAE's mediation efforts in conflicts where religion plays a divisive role. The country has supported interfaith peacebuilding initiatives in Africa and Southeast Asia, often under the umbrella of the Abu Dhabi Forum for Peace led by Shaykh ʿAbd Allāh bin Bayyah. In Indonesia, Abu Dhabi-linked partners and the UAE Embassy have co-hosted interreligious gatherings and human-fraternity events, combining religious dialogue with humanitarian assistance and reinforcing the UAE's desire to serve as a facilitator of reconciliation. By financing interreligious conferences in Mauritania, Nigeria, and Indonesia, the state positions itself as an architect of global moderation rather than a passive donor.
Domestic Cohesion, Cultural Diplomacy, and the Synthesis of Conviction and Strategy

The international success of the UAE's emphasis on interfaith dialogue is inseparable from its domestic social policy. The same values that support its external partnerships function internally as instruments of cohesion in one of the most demographically diverse societies on earth. More than 85 percent of residents are expatriates from virtually every country. Such complexity could easily generate friction, yet the Emirates has maintained social stability through a civic ethos of courtesy, respect, and hospitality that has gradually become codified as national identity.

This transformation was neither accidental nor purely managerial. Emirati leaders recognized early that diversity could be an asset if governed through moral consensus rather than coercion. Schools, media, and civic programs thus emphasize tolerance as an Emirati virtue rooted in heritage rather than imported from the West. Textbooks portray Sheikh Zayed as the "Father of Tolerance," and national celebrations, such as the annual Festival of Tolerance, reaffirm coexistence as a patriotic duty. In effect, the state educates a multicultural population into a shared narrative of respect.

The Ministry of Tolerance and Coexistence works closely with the Ministry of Education to promote tolerance and peaceful coexistence across the national curriculum. The Ministry of Education's Moral Education program, introduced across all seven Emirates in 2017, provides instruction from primary through secondary levels on values such as respect, compassion, and cultural understanding. Textbooks situate these ideals within Islamic sources and practices, including Qurʾānic injunctions on justice toward non-Muslims, dialogue with the People of the Book, and the Prophet Muḥammad's conduct toward his Jewish neighbors. This frames tolerance as an Islamic principle, rather than as something externally imposed, thus deflecting any criticism that tolerance is a secular innovation. At the tertiary level, Emirati universities such as the Mohamed bin Zayed University for Humanities offer degree programs in tolerance and coexistence, which extends this moral formation into higher education.
At the community level, interfaith cooperation is evident in everyday life. Churches and temples operate freely in residential areas; Ramadan iftars often include non-Muslims as guests; and Christmas, Diwali, and Vaisakhi are publicly acknowledged in the media. The government promotes volunteerism through platforms such as The National Service Volunteers Program, which encourages citizens and expatriates to collaborate in charitable projects regardless of religion. The intention and cumulative effect of these practices is to normalize religious diversity and respect as the default condition of Emirati society.

From a sociological perspective, the UAE's model of coexistence might be interpreted as a form of what some scholars have called a "civic religion"; that is, as a moral framework that sacralizes the unity that sits at the heart of classical Islamic concepts of community and nation. Like the civil religions described by Robert Bellah in the American context, the Emirati variant fuses faith, patriotism, and moral aspiration into a single symbolic system. The state intends that shared rituals of tolerance, such as festivals, educational programs, and interfaith gatherings, will bind citizens and expatriates in a moral community without erasing their unique religious positions.

This approach also serves a strategic function. By embedding respect and restraint in social norms, the UAE strives to reduce the likelihood of ethnic or sectarian conflict. Scholars such as Kristian Coates Ulrichsen argue that tolerance operates as both ideology and instrument of security. It ensures that diversity, which might otherwise produce instability, instead contributes to national cohesion. In this sense, tolerance is not the by-product of stability; it is one of the mechanisms that creates it.

The economic implications are equally significant. The UAE's hospitality and tourism industries depend heavily on the perception of openness and safety. According to the World Tourism Organization, the Emirates

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consistently rank among the most visited destinations in the Middle East and attracted over 20 million tourists annually before the pandemic. Government policy documents explicitly link this success to the nation's reputation for inclusivity. The UAE markets religious diversity as a dimension of the visitor experience: tourists are welcomed to mosque tours, visits to churches and temples, and public Ramadan cultural programmes tailored to international audiences. In doing so, interfaith coexistence becomes not only a moral virtue but also an economic asset. As one scholar puts it, the process reflects "the branding of tolerance".

Yet such commodification does not necessarily undermine sincerity. On the contrary, the decision to invest in religious and interfaith infrastructure, often at substantial public expense, demonstrates that the leadership views moral capital as a form of national wealth. The Abrahamic Family House, the BAPS Mandir, and numerous community centers represent financial commitments that yield no immediate material return. Their purpose is reputational and aspirational; that is, to foster coexistence by making it visible.

Critiques of the UAE's model have appeared in Western media and some academic literature. Detractors argue that the state's emphasis on interfaith dialogues operates as "reputation laundering" for an authoritarian regime. They cite restrictions on political dissent and note that religious openness does not extend to political pluralism. However, this critique often rests on an assumption that liberal parliamentary democracy is the only authentic form of freedom. Within the Emirati worldview, freedom is not defined as the possession of voting rights in a competitive multi-party system, but as security, dignity, and the opportunity to live in peace according to one's faith. The absence of western-style political pluralism does not negate the presence of significant happiness among both citizens and expatriate workers.

Moreover, the UAE's record in supporting global humanitarian causes complicates the accusation of mere image management. The country's extensive contributions to refugee relief, education, and post-conflict reconstruction in Yemen, Syria, and countries through Africa align with its declared principles of coexistence. These are measurable and verifiable acts that extend beyond public relations. The consistency of such policies over decades, indeed since well before tolerance became a formal policy position, suggests an ethical commitment integrated into the machinery of the state.

In analytical terms, the UAE exemplifies what might be called "integrative moral realism." It accepts that moral ideals can serve strategic interests without losing authenticity. By institutionalizing tolerance, the Emirates demonstrate that the promotion of sincerely held values and the expectation of tangible and public results need not be mutually exclusive. The success of this model challenges conventional dichotomies between idealism and realism in international relations. It implies that moral legitimacy can be cultivated as a durable form of influence; as a concept of power grounded in virtue.

As the next section will show, this synthesis culminates in a distinct philosophical claim: that interfaith coexistence, far from being a tool of convenience, has become central to the UAE's identity and global vision. The policy of tolerance operates as both self-definition and projection as a way of affirming what the nation stands for and how it wishes to be seen.

5. Critical Evaluation and Comparative Analysis of the UAE's Interfaith Dialogue

The emergence of interfaith dialogue as a pillar of the United Arab Emirates' national identity represents a rare synthesis of moral conviction and pragmatic statecraft. Over the past five decades, the UAE has converted values long considered private virtues, especially tolerance, compassion, and coexistence, into the grammar of governance and diplomacy. Yet, as the scope of these policies expanded, so did the complexity of the scholarly and political debates surrounding them. Some see in the UAE's strategy a sincere embodiment of Islamic humanism. Others interpret it as a calculated form of reputation management. A comprehensive evaluation requires moving beyond these binary readings to examine how conviction and interest interact to sustain moral legitimacy in both domestic and global arenas.

Supporters of the sincerity thesis emphasize the historical and theological continuity underpinning Emirati pluralism. They note that the ideas expressed by Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahyan in the 1970s, including his insistence that Islam demands tolerance of and respect for all faiths, find direct institutional expression in contemporary policy. The passage from ethical precept to policy law, from mosque sermon to state behaviour, reflects a moral evolution anchored in religious conviction rather than political expediency. As one scholar observes, Sheikh Zayed's Islam "is charity, is justice, is tolerance and this was evident in all of his actions as a leader," an ethos that survives in the discourse of his successors. It is this continuity, supporters argue, that gives the UAE's interfaith initiatives a degree of moral credibility.

For this group of scholars and diplomats, the UAE represents a practical response to the dilemmas of modern Islamic governance: how to sustain religious

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authenticity in a globalized, multi-faith society. Emirati religious inclusiveness, in this view, is neither a concession to Western pressure nor a break from tradition but a renewal of Islamic fiqh al-taʿāyush, meaning the jurisprudence of coexistence. The creation of the Ministry of Tolerance, the codification of anti-hate laws, and the establishment of interfaith institutions such as the Abrahamic Family House are seen as manifestations of the Qurʾānic principle that diversity is divinely ordained. These policies, they contend, are theologically justified and socially necessary.

The second interpretive camp, often aligned with western critical theory and human-rights discourse, sees Emirati "tolerance washing" as a form of virtue signaling. According to this view, interfaith dialogue functions as a carefully managed narrative designed to mitigate criticism of domestic politics while securing foreign investment and military cooperation. Human Rights Watch, for instance, has argued that the UAE's religious openness contrasts sharply with its intolerance of political dissent. Some analysts interpret the UAE's moral branding not as religious authenticity but as a calculated form of authoritarian statecraft. Christopher Davidson argues that Gulf rulers employ "sharp power" techniques (including strategic image management and moral rhetoric) to project stability and legitimacy abroad. Similarly, Andreas Krieg, prominent among the UAE's critics, maintains that the UAE has weaponized narratives of tolerance and moderation to reinforce regime security and global prestige. In this reading, the Emirates' moral symbolism functions as a state-led communication strategy, designed to transform virtue into influence and soft power into regime durability.

This critique, while possessing at least some persuasive power, nonetheless conflates political pluralism with heightened political morality. This seems to be an inappropriate way of assessing the Emirati conception of freedom, which is not derived from the liberal tradition of individual freedoms but from the Islamic and communitarian ideal of mutual responsibility. Within this moral framework, the role of the state is to guarantee dignity, security, and respect for difference, not necessarily to facilitate individualistic atomism. As Sheikh Abdullah bin Zayed Al Nahyan explains, "The well-being and happiness of the citizens should be the criteria of the human rights situation in a country. Imposing one's own values on others is also a form of hegemony." Evaluating Emirati tolerance by the standards of European secularism, therefore, risks misreading its philosophical foundations.

The UAE and its supporters would argue that its approach can be better understood through comparative analysis with other states that deploy moral diplomacy. Singapore, for example, institutionalized racial and religious harmony as a state doctrine after independence and emphasized "multiracialism" as being essential to stability. Similarly, Bhutan's policy of "Gross National Happiness" integrates moral and cultural values into governance. In both cases, critics maintain that the state-managed assertion of moral goodness substitutes for political choice and reinforces elite authority. Yet these systems have also produced societies marked by social peace, economic growth, and high levels of public trust. The UAE's moral statecraft operates within this family of post-liberal governance models.

From the standpoint of international relations theory, the Emirati case exemplifies what constructivist scholars call norm entrepreneurship. States that succeed in representing what constitutes "appropriate" behavior in the international system gain moral authority. By championing interfaith dialogue as a global norm, the UAE acts as a moral entrepreneur that shapes discourse well beyond its size or military strength. Hosting the 2019 papal visit, sponsoring the Document on Human Fraternity, and establishing the Zayed Award for Human Fraternity were not isolated acts of cultural diplomacy, but deliberate norm-making exercises to position the Emirates as a model of Islamic moderation that rejects extremism without renouncing faith.

Equally significant is the UAE's engagement with the global "post-secular" recognition that religion has re-entered world politics as a constructive force rather than a relic of pre-modernity. The Emirati government's willingness to engage religious leaders as diplomatic actors rather than as threats aligns with this trend. Where many western states approach religion defensively, the UAE embraces it as a bridge of legitimacy. By hosting dialogues between Christian, Muslim, Hindu, and Jewish clerics, the Emirates seeks to reframe religion as a solution to global disorder. In this way, interfaith dialogue doubles as a counter-narrative to both western secularism and Islamist exclusivism.

The UAE's vision may also be read through the lens of Islam's cosmopolitan ethic, a concept advanced by Shaykh ʿAbd Allāh bin Bayyah and other scholars who argue that Islam's universal ethics can sustain a very diverse and inclusive form of modernity. This type of cosmopolitan Islam rejects both the strictness of fundamentalism and the relativism of secularism and proposes instead a theology of mutual recognition and respect. This intellectual movement, largely based in Abu Dhabi's scholarly networks, provides the ideological underpinning for Emirati tolerance. It presents coexistence not as concession but as obedience to divine will. As Pope Francis and Ahmad al-Tayyeb stated: "the pluralism

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and the diversity of religions … are willed by God in His wisdom."

The authenticity of the UAE's approach is further reinforced by its economic and social context. A society in which foreigners outnumber citizens by a ratio of eight to one cannot rely on coercion to preserve harmony. Cultural coexistence is not a moral luxury but a practical societal necessity. Yet necessity alone does not explain the ethical sophistication of the UAE's policy; a sophistication that derives from the fusion of pragmatic governance with spiritual insight. The result is a system in which religious diversity becomes both moral principle and strategic advantage.

Comparative indices rank the UAE among global leaders on tolerance toward immigrants and/or other foreigners. Intercommunal tensions are minimal, and places of worship for different religions coexist peacefully. These outcomes would be impossible if tolerance were merely a façade. The experience of millions of residents seems to testify to the effectiveness and authenticity of the UAE's efforts.

Still, the sustainability of this moral statecraft will depend on the continued balance between ideation and performance. The temptation to instrumentalize virtue for prestige is real. If tolerance becomes a rhetorical brand rather than an authentic ethic, its credibility will quickly erode. Maintaining theological depth, transparency, and civic participation is therefore essential. Sheikh Nahyan bin Mubarak Al Nahyan, Minister of Tolerance, acknowledged this challenge when he stated: "We know that tolerance does not flourish without hard work." The endurance of Emirati support for diversity will depend on this discipline and the constant translation of theory into practice.

The evidence thus suggests that the UAE's emphasis on interfaith dialogue is neither cynical nor naïvely idealistic. It constitutes a deliberate experiment in moral governance; one that uses the language of ethics to secure both stability and international respect. Its success lies precisely in collapsing the false dichotomies between sincerity and strategy, faith and reason, and morality and power. Rather than hiding authoritarianism behind moral rhetoric, as some critics claim, the UAE has sought to redefine what legitimacy means: authority grounded not in elections or ideology, but in the meaningful and visible practice of virtue. Whether this experiment can endure generational change and geopolitical flux will depend on how deeply tolerance and religious freedoms and engagement become internalized within both policy and society.

Synthesis, Conclusion, and Policy Recommendations

The cumulative effect of the United Arab Emirates' focus on interfaith dialogue has been to reposition the state as both a moral actor and a strategic innovator. The preceding analysis reveals that tolerance and coexistence in the UAE are not rhetorical veneers but deliberate instruments of governance grounded in an authentic moral worldview. Over the past five decades, the Emirates have constructed an elaborate architecture of virtue, comprising legislation, institutions, education, and cultural diplomacy, that both expresses conviction and generates both internal cohesion and international capital. This achievement challenges the long-standing assumption that religion in politics is inherently destabilizing. In the Emirati case, faiths and dialogue between them is intended to contribute to stability.

Domestically, the translation of ethical ideals into public policy has cultivated a sense of collective belonging among a population otherwise divided by ethnicity, language, and creed. The experience of coexistence in daily life — the ease with which churches, mosques, and temples operate side by side and the lack of violence and conflict between adherents of different belief systems — illustrates that the values of goodwill and respect are not confined to elite rhetoric. They are being normalized through education, media, and urban design. Scholars of Gulf urbanism have noted that the spatial proximity of diverse places of worship in cities such as Abu Dhabi and Dubai physically embodies the moral philosophy of its interfaith emphasis. This integration of moral symbolism into architecture, education, and law ensures that tolerance functions simultaneously as ideology, experience, and aesthetic.

At the same time, the strategy has served as a vehicle for soft power. Through the symbolism of coexistence, the UAE have diversified its international partnerships, enhanced their attractiveness to investors and tourists, and expanded their role in humanitarian mediation. By aligning virtue with interest, the leadership has achieved a type of co-optive power, meaning an ability to secure outcomes because others admire its values. In practice, this means that global institutions, religious leaders, and foreign publics are inclined to trust the UAE's intentions even when they may disagree with some aspects of its politics. This trust constitutes an invaluable diplomatic asset.

However, the endurance of this soft power will depend on the continued perception that the UAE's commitment to tolerance is genuine. Symbolic projects such as the Abrahamic Family House or the BAPS Hindu Mandir have great communicative value, but their long-term credibility will hinge on how effectively they are integrated into everyday civic life. The challenge for

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policymakers lies in moving from formal governmental expression to participatory culture. The state must encourage bottom-up forms of dialogue and cultural participation that translate official ideals into popular practice.

The global reception of the UAE's initiatives has been generally positive, but not without reservations. International religious leaders, including the late Pope Francis and the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar University, have repeatedly affirmed the sincerity of Emirati efforts, describing them as "a light in the region." Some academic observers, however, caution that the coexistence narrative must not obscure other dimensions of governance, especially human rights issues. Yet even these critics concede that the consistency and scale of the UAE's projects distinguish it from mere rhetorical campaigns. Few other states have institutionalized tolerance through such concrete means or sustained it over multiple decades.

Another critical dimension is generational sustainability. The younger Emirati population, exposed to global information networks and social media, interprets coexistence through new lenses. For them, tolerance must extend beyond religion to include issues of gender, race, and environmental justice. Although gender is still not a focus, the Ministry of Tolerance and Coexistence has begun to address these emerging concerns through programs that connect interfaith values with sustainability and digital ethics. By doing so, it aligns moral education with global citizenship and ensures that tolerance evolves with social change rather than ossifying into state ritual.

The success of this adaptation will determine whether the UAE's model remains influential. If the next generation internalizes coexistence as a lived virtue rather than an official narrative, the federation will have achieved what few modern states have managed: the moral education of a multicultural polity. Conversely, if tolerance is perceived as top-down branding detached from personal experience, its normative power will wane. The balance between state leadership and civic participation will therefore be decisive.

From a realist perspective, commentators might argue that all moral diplomacy is ultimately self-interested. Yet the Emirati experience demonstrates that, even if they are right, self-interest can coexist with sincere belief. The state's sustained investment in education, humanitarian aid, and religious infrastructure suggests that moral governance is not merely an expedient tactic but a conviction embedded in national identity. The durability of this conviction will determine the credibility of the UAE's claim to moral leadership.

Ultimately, the UAE's project of interfaith dialogue exemplifies an approach that both recognizes the utility and political benefit of advancing an ethical position while affirming its intrinsic and significant value and influence. The state gains reputation and influence through tolerance, but it also enacts its own understanding of divine purpose for human coexistence. This integration allows the UAE to navigate global modernity without surrendering cultural or religious authenticity. It offers a vision of how small states can exercise moral agency in a multipolar world.

Policy Recommendations

In light of these findings, this paper proposes several policy recommendations in order to consolidate and extend the achievements of the UAE's strong public focus on interfaith dialogue.

The UAE should deepen theological literacy among policymakers and educators. Sustained collaboration between scholars of Islamic jurisprudence and secular academics would ensure that public discourse on tolerance retains intellectual rigor and theological depth. Coexistence should be explained not merely as policy but as an expression of religious truth and tradition.

The UAE should expand community-level interfaith initiatives. While high-profile events attract attention, long-term social cohesion depends on everyday interaction. Municipal councils, schools, and neighborhood associations could organize interfaith volunteer projects and foster bonds that transcend ceremonial dialogue.

The country should also strengthen evaluation and transparency mechanisms. The Ministry of Tolerance and Coexistence should continue to publish data on program outcomes and allow international scholars and institutions to assess effectiveness objectively. Evidence-based evaluation will enhance both credibility and global learning.

The country should also broaden the global scope of interfaith engagement. The UAE's initiatives have focused largely on Abrahamic and South Asian faiths; future programs should include East Asian, African, and indigenous traditions. Such inclusivity would reinforce the claim that Emirati tolerance is universal rather than regional.[75]

These recommendations recognize that tolerance is not a static condition but a dynamic process requiring renewal. The UAE's challenge now is to maintain authenticity while embracing change; that is, to preserve the spirit of

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Sheikh Zayed's moral vision while adapting it to new generations and global contexts.[76] If it succeeds, the federation will not only sustain its domestic harmony and diplomatic influence but also offer the world an enduring example of how faith, virtue, and modernity can coexist within a single moral order.

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