News

by The Associated Press

View Author Profile

Join the Conversation

Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. Learn more

ABU DHABI, United Arab Emirates — February 3, 2020
Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

Interfaith leaders gathered on Monday in Abu Dhabi to mark one year since Pope Francis' historic trip to the Arabian Peninsula, a visit that saw leading Muslim clerics gather alongside the pope to promote co-existence.

The United Arab Emirates has worked to promote itself over the past year as a beacon of religious tolerance, despite it's hard limits on political speech. The majority of the country's population are not Emirati Muslim citizens, but foreigners, millions of whom are Christian and Hindu.

Abu Dhabi hosted Monday's meeting to showcase its continued efforts in promoting interfaith dialogue as it prepares to break ground this year on a compound that will house a mosque, church and synagogue side by side. The Abrahamic House of Fraternity project is due to be completed in 2022.

In the neighboring emirate of Dubai, an unmarked villa has already been turned into a synagogue.

The UAE and Saudi Arabia, along with other Gulf states, have been expanding their outreach to Christian groups, like evangelicals, and Jewish organizations. The effort coincides with a broader alignment of political interests and ties emerging between Gulf Arab states and Israel, which share a common foe in Iran.

A U.S. rabbi, a representative of the Catholic church and a trained sheikh from Egypt's Al-Azhar, the revered 1,000-year-old seat of Sunni Islamic learning, attended Monday's briefing where they discussed ongoing interfaith efforts.

Senior Rabbi at the Washington Hebrew Congregation, Bruce Lustig, insisted his participation on this visit was "apolitical".

“We are here as a forum for peace for the whole human family, so I am delighted when there are greater ties with the state of Israel," he told The Associated Press. "I am delighted when there’s opportunities to bring justice and peace to so many people who have so many injustices in the world.”

Israel's treatment of Palestinians and the sanctity of one of Islam's holiest sites in Jerusalem remain obstacles to full normalization. Like most of the Arab world, the UAE does not have formal diplomatic relations with Israel.

Pope Francis' trip last year marked the first ever papal visit to the Arabian Peninsula. He ended his trip with a mass for 180,000 Christians, capping a visit that emphasized the presence of minority Christians in the region and a greater understanding with Islam.

During his trip, Francis also participated in a conference on interreligious dialogue and signed a “human fraternity” document to promote coexistence and confront extremism with the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar, Ahmed el-Tayeb.

Just before he departed for Abu Dhabi last year, the pope appealed for an end to Yemen’s humanitarian crisis, saying the “cries of these children and their parents rise up” to God.

The UAE is a key member of the Saudi-led coalition at war with Yemen’s Iran-aligned rebels. The conflict has driven Yemen to the brink of famine and caused the world’s worst humanitarian crisis.

Advertisement