The United Arab Emirates and the Architecture of Interfaith Diplomacy: Moral Conviction and Soft Power in Practice

Prof. Joel Hayward (FRSA, FRHistS)

Prof. Joel Hayward (FRSA, FRHistS)

is a Senior Research Fellow at the Anwar Gargash Diplomatic Academy and the Abrahamic Family House in Abu Dhabi. He is consistently listed every year as one of the world's 500 most influential Muslims (https://themuslim500.com/). Prof. Hayward has held various senior academic leadership posts, including Dean of the Sycamore Leadership Academy, Chief Executive of the Cambridge Muslim College, Chair of Humanities and Social Sciences at Khalifa University, Head of Air Power Studies at King's College London, and Dean of the Royal Air Force College. He is the author or editor of 18 books, over 40 peer-reviewed journal articles, and dozens of book chapters and encyclopedia entries.

Summary

- This Insight delves into how the United Arab Emirates has developed a distinctive model of interfaith diplomacy that merges deep moral conviction with strategic statecraft. Rooted in the vision of the founding president, Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahyan, who saw Islamic ethics as inseparable from civic responsibility, the UAE has made religious coexistence a pillar of national identity.

- Rather than treat tolerance as symbolic branding, it has institutionalised coexistence through ministries, curricula, cultural institutions, architectural landmarks, and sustained diplomatic initiatives. Islamic jurisprudential frameworks, especially those advanced by Islamic scholars such as Sheikh Abdullah bin Bayyah, provide theological legitimacy to this approach, articulating coexistence as a religious duty grounded in Qur'ānic ethics and classical legal texts.

- This ethical foundation has evolved into a potent form of soft power. Interfaith diplomacy enables the UAE to cultivate trust, mediate across civilizational divides, and build durable partnerships. At home, it reinforces cohesion among a highly diverse resident population by anchoring unity in shared values rather than lineage or ideology.

- Abroad, it enhances the nation's credibility and attractiveness, which supports tourism, investment, humanitarian engagement, and multilateral diplomacy. Landmarks such as the Abrahamic Family House, the BAPS Hindu Mandir, and the Sheikh Zayed Grand Mosque translate values into tangible cultural experience, strengthening the UAE's reputation as a global centre of coexistence.

- The UAE's experience demonstrates that faith-based ethics can support modern governance while providing a constructive alternative to secular models of pluralism. Its interfaith diplomacy now stands as both an ethical contribution to global peace and a strategic resource that advances national interests through moral authority rather than coercive power.

- Finally, the Insight offers some policy recommendations to advance these issues further:

  » Institutionalize interfaith education at all levels

  » Develop a national framework for community dialogue

  » Train diplomats in interreligious competence

  » Leverage interfaith centres for transformational ideation

The Issue

The central issue addressed in this Insight is how the United Arab Emirates has transformed interfaith coexistence from a moral aspiration into an integrated system of governance, culture, and diplomacy. In an era marked by religious polarization, identity conflict, and geopolitical fragmentation, the UAE faces both the challenge and the opportunity of articulating a model in which Islamic ethics support civic peace and global cooperation. The question is not simply whether tolerance can be promoted rhetorically, but whether it can be embedded structurally in institutions, education, and public life in a way that is both authentic and sustainable.

This matters profoundly for the UAE and its region. Domestically, the country's demographic reality, with expatriates outnumbering citizens, means that national cohesion cannot rest on ethnicity or sect. Stability depends on shared ethical norms and a civic identity that transcends confessional boundaries. Interfaith diplomacy thus functions as a mechanism of social harmony, binding diverse communities into a coherent whole.

Regionally and internationally, the UAE's approach positions it as a constructive actor capable of mediating across religious and cultural divides. In a Middle East often associated with sectarian tension, the UAE's model offers a counter-narrative rooted in Islamic virtue ethics, legal reasoning, and institutional practice. By demonstrating that religious commitment and modernity are compatible, the UAE enhances its soft power, attracts global talent and investment, and expands diplomatic influence through credibility rather than coercion.

Ultimately, the issue is how a value-based model of coexistence can strengthen governance at home while contributing to stability, dialogue, and cooperation across the broader region.

Among contemporary states, the United Arab Emirates has uniquely integrated religious coexistence into its national narrative and diplomacy. Over the past decade, it has placed the language of tolerance, fraternity, and interreligious cooperation at the core of its domestic and international image. This emphasis on interfaith engagement is not accidental; it reflects both an ethical worldview and a strategic understanding of twenty-first-century diplomacy. The UAE's model of "interfaith diplomacy" operates simultaneously as moral vocation and soft-power enterprise; that is, as a project that advances spiritual and civic harmony while amplifying the nation's credibility and partnerships abroad.[1]

This Insight advances two interrelated claims. First, the UAE's commitment to interfaith dialogue arises from deep moral conviction, embedded in Islamic theology and the political vision of Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahyan, the federation's founding leader. Second, this moral vision has evolved into a strategic asset that supports the UAE's soft-power architecture by enhancing its reputation, facilitating diplomacy, and contributing to tourism and cultural appeal. The analysis is divided conceptually — much of it devoted to moral conviction and some to strategic outcomes — but it stresses their interaction rather than their opposition.

Moral Conviction and the Ethical Foundations of Coexistence

The philosophical and ethical foundation of the UAE's interfaith diplomacy lies in the vision of Sheikh Zayed. From the country's establishment in 1971, Sheikh Zayed emphasized compassion, justice, and respect as core civic values. His repeated statements that "religion is for peace and mercy" were not rhetorical gestures but reflections of an ethical cosmology in which faith serves the common good.[2] Under his leadership, Islamic virtue was linked to civic responsibility. To be a good Muslim was to be a good neighbour and a just citizen. This articulation of religious morality as civic ethos became the spiritual constitution of the federation.

Subsequent leaders inherited and formalized this orientation. The UAE's establishment of the Ministry of Tolerance and Coexistence in 2016 and the declaration of 2019 as the Year of Tolerance institutionalized what had previously been moral instinct. The ministry's mandate to promote coexistence, mutual respect, and peaceful relations among residents and peoples translated ethical language into governance practice.[3] Unlike similar initiatives in other states, the UAE's tolerance agenda was not designed primarily as image management, but as the realization of a long-standing national ethos.

This ethos finds theological legitimacy in Islamic scripture and jurisprudence. The Qurʾānic injunction lā ikrāha fī al-dīn ("there is no compulsion in religion," Sūrat al-Baqarah 2:256) underpins a vision of faith based on free conscience and mutual respect. A number of Islamic scholars, including Sheikh Abdullah bin Bayyah, Chair of the Emirates Fatwa Council, have drawn on classical Islamic jurisprudence to elaborate a jurisprudence of coexistence (fiqh al-ta

āyush) that treats peace, protection of minorities, and interreligious cooperation as normative Islamic obligations, grounding them in the Ṣaḥīfat al-Madīna and the Qurʾānic ethics of justice and benevolence.

Bin Bayyah set out this framework in the Marrakesh Declaration concept paper that he directed: "The Rights of Religious Minorities in Predominantly Muslim Lands: Legal Framework and a Call to Action".[4] Building on that legal scaffolding, policy analysts noted that Bin Bayyah's approach translates theology into implementable policy — including constitutional citizenship, covenantal diversity, and practical protections — rather than leaving it at the level of rhetoric.[5] He then operationalized the vision through the Forum for Promoting Peace in Muslim Societies, whose programmes deploy education, civil society dialogue, and humanitarian outreach to embed coexistence in civic life; the Forum's "Alliance of Virtue" platform further articulates a shared-virtue ethic as a public blueprint.[6]

The Forum, founded in Abu Dhabi in 2014 and formally renamed the Abu Dhabi Forum for Peace at its 2021 annual meeting, illustrates the synthesis of theology and diplomacy. Bringing together scholars from across the Muslim world, it advances interpretations of Islam that affirm religious diversity and coexistence. Its 2022 proceedings and publications reiterated that diversity is a sign of divine wisdom and that dialogue is a religious obligation for believers.[7] The language of such texts demonstrates that the UAE's approach to interfaith diplomacy arises from scriptural reasoning as much as political reasoning.

Education policy reinforces these principles. The Ministry of Education introduced ethics and tolerance modules into school curricula beginning in 2017, teaching empathy, respect, and social responsibility. Universities host conferences on interreligious ethics and civic values. These initiatives reflect the UAE's understanding that tolerance must be cultivated as moral formation rather than imposed through law. The state is thus assuming the role of ethical educator in order to ensure that coexistence becomes habitual across generations.

Infrastructure and architecture can disseminate a kind of moral pedagogy. Abu Dhabi's Abrahamic Family House (a co-located mosque, church, and synagogue with a forum) embodies, in built form, the claim that different faiths can live in harmony. Its designers underscore this by giving the three sanctuaries equal stature, size, and materiality to remove any sense of hierarchy. Adjaye frames the project as architecture that "enshrine[s] the kind of world we want to live in… [rising] above the notion of hierarchical difference," so that formal equality reads as a civic and theological parity.[8]

The BAPS Hindu Mandir, inaugurated in 2024 as the first traditional, stone-carved Hindu temple on the Arabian Peninsula, extends that visual language of coexistence beyond the Abrahamic traditions.[9] UAE messaging around these sites explicitly presents them as places for religious tolerance and education that send a message of unity, showing how design is used to communicate moral meaning; that is, that religious difference need not entail social distance.

Coexistence as Moral Statecraft

The UAE's approach can be understood as a form of moral statecraft; meaning governing through values. Rather than treat religion as a private matter, Emirati leaders have integrated spiritual principles into the logic of governance. This fusion challenges the conventional dichotomy between secular diplomacy and religious ethics. As Charles Taylor argues, modern plural societies should aim for an overlapping consensus among diverse moral outlooks, rather than impose a strict secular uniformity.[10] The UAE believes that it exemplifies this by constructing a plural moral horizon within an Islamic framework.

The 2019 Document on Human Fraternity, signed in Abu Dhabi by Pope Francis and Grand Imam Ahmed al-Tayeb of Al-Azhar University, widely accepted to be the hub of Sunni Islamic orthodoxy, epitomizes this moral diplomacy. It declares that peace arises from mutual respect, dialogue, and social justice.[11] Hosting the event positioned the UAE as both venue and participant in a global moral discourse. The subsequent creation of the Higher Committee of Human Fraternity (HCHF) institutionalized its implementation through educational and humanitarian partnerships.[12] The document's framing of fraternity aligns with Islamic ethics yet speaks to universal audiences and gives the UAE cross-civilizational resonance.

Domestically, the UAE's interfaith agenda is framed as moral nation-building through the National Tolerance Programme, leveraging shared ethical norms to bind an exceptionally diverse resident population. Neighborhood initiatives such as "Neighbors for All" and state-level tolerance awards publicly honor citizens and residents who model empathy and civic virtue, reinforcing what officials describe as a culture of coexistence.[13]

The sociological payoff of this culture is significant. In Abu Dhabi, multilevel analysis shows that community participation and meaningful intergroup contact are associated with higher generalized social trust. Researchers conclude that involvement in local voluntary activities breeds trust, reciprocity, solidarity, and cooperation.[14] In this sense, interfaith diplomacy is not only external, but also domestically performative, meaning that the UAE's internal peace becomes both a laboratory and a showcase for its global message. What some might call ethical pragmatism — the operationalization of moral conviction through administration and diplomacy — appears in the UAE's tolerance architecture and soft-power strategy, as documented in recent studies of Gulf public diplomacy and religious soft power.[15]

Interfaith Diplomacy as Civilizational Vision

Beyond moral statecraft, the UAE's interfaith diplomacy expresses a broader civilizational vision: the idea that the Arab-Islamic world can lead in promoting global coexistence. This ambition is evident in the narrative of the "New Human Fraternity" advanced in official speeches and cultural programmes. Rather than adopting Western liberal secularism, the UAE articulates a set of different ideas grounded in Islamic virtue ethics and cosmopolitan openness.

Philosophically, this model resonates with the thought of contemporary Muslim ethicists who view cordial coexistence as a divine test of moral maturity. By celebrating rather than tolerating difference, the UAE advances the conviction that differences can enrich collective moral life. Sheikh Abdallah bin Bayyah explicitly frames coexistence as a mercy-centered religious duty: "This will restore the efficacy of the values of mercy, relief, helping one another, and benevolence," Grounding cooperation in shared Abrahamic ethics, he says, "provides the basis for peace and coexistence amongst us."[16] Read this way, the UAE's initiatives sit within a theological tradition in which peace is obligation, not convenience.

The internationalization of this vision is facilitated through the UAE's hosting of interfaith conferences, exhibitions, and awards. The World Tolerance Summit and the Global Interfaith Forum regularly attract leaders and scholars from all continents. These events generate networks of dialogue that extend beyond diplomacy into civil society. In this way, interfaith engagement becomes both an ethical mission and a form of cultural globalization centered in the Arab Gulf.

Economy of Coexistence

Economically, the moral economy of coexistence supports the nation's diversification strategy. Tolerance underwrites innovation, tourism, and cultural industries by ensuring an atmosphere of openness and security. Independent benchmarks indicate that the UAE's "safe" and "welcoming" destination image is tied to strong tourism economic performance. The World Economic Forum's Travel & Tourism Development Index 2024 ranks the UAE highest in the Middle East and 18th globally on overall travel-tourism readiness (including safety and security and an enabling environment), while the World Travel & Tourism Council reports international visitor spending in the UAE surged nearly 40% in 2023 to AED 175 billion, exceeding 2019 levels.[17] One can read this as evidence that reputation and policy are translating into economic returns.

The UAE's moral-civilizational project also carries symbolic implications for the wider Islamic world. By demonstrating that Islamic values can function within modernity and promote tolerance and coexistence between confessional communities, it challenges narratives that equate religiosity with rigidity. This positions the UAE as an exemplar of "moderate modernity," influencing debates from North Africa to Southeast Asia. Its diplomatic vocabulary, which emphasizes respect, fraternity, and coexistence, resonates with Muslim publics weary of polarization and therefore expands the moral constituency of its soft power.

The UAE's interfaith diplomacy thus functions as more than moral vocation. It has become a sophisticated form of soft power that aligns ethical conviction with national strategy. The classic definition of soft power as the "ability to get others to want what you want" through attraction rather than through coercion provides a useful framework for understanding how the UAE deploys tolerance and coexistence as persuasive tools. Rather than exporting ideology, it seeks to project an image of moral credibility and cultural confidence that inspires cooperation.

At the diplomatic level, interfaith engagement allows the UAE to cultivate partnerships on the basis of shared values. Embassies and cultural missions abroad frequently host events that highlight religious diversity within the federation, including Ramadan iftars open to Christian and Jewish guests, Christmas receptions at UAE consulates, and lectures

on coexistence at universities in Europe and Asia. Such activities embody a type of "religious soft power," meaning a form of influence rooted in moral symbolism and cultural hospitality. By demonstrating inclusivity in practice, Emirati diplomats frame their nation as a trustworthy mediator in a polarized world.

This strategy also strengthens multilateral diplomacy. The UAE's leadership in humanitarian and peacebuilding initiatives, such as the Zayed Award for Human Fraternity[18] and its UNESCO-partnered programmes on tolerance and intercultural dialogue,[19] signals that faith can serve as a bridge rather than a boundary in global affairs. As Monier argues, the UAE has made religious tolerance a central element of public diplomacy and soft power and crafted a cooperative language that travels from Geneva to Jakarta.[20] Such efforts expand reputational capital and enable the country to navigate complex alliances beyond traditional power politics.

Cultural Diplomacy

Cultural diplomacy is another key instrument in this soft power system. The Louvre Abu Dhabi epitomizes how the UAE links art, heritage, and coexistence. Its galleries juxtapose Qur'ānic manuscripts with Christian icons and Buddhist sculptures, visually narrating humanity's shared spiritual history. By curating global heritage through Emirati stewardship, the museum asserts the UAE's role as custodian of civilizational dialogue. Similar logics guide the Sharjah Art Foundation and Dubai Expo 2020, which explicitly foregrounded "Connecting Minds, Creating the Future" as a theme that included cultural and religious understanding. These cultural platforms transform ethical ideals into experiential diplomacy.

Tourism further amplifies this soft-power dimension. Visitors are drawn not only to luxury but also to the sense of social openness and cultural curiosity symbolized by interfaith landmarks. The Sheikh Zayed Grand Mosque, the Abrahamic Family House and the BAPS Hindu Mandir serve simultaneously as sacred spaces and international attractions and translate the abstract value of coexistence into cultural experience and visual display. Heo calls this phenomenon "tolerance as tourism,"[21] but in the UAE it operates less as marketing and more as ethical demonstration; as evidence that diversity can thrive in the Arab world.

These cultural and economic effects reinforce each other. The state's commitment to coexistence attracts global talent and investment by ensuring a climate of stability and openness. Multinational companies frequently cite the UAE's social tolerance as a key factor in locating regional headquarters in Dubai or Abu Dhabi. Thus, moral credibility functions as an economic asset, with soft power attraction generating cooperation, and cooperation yielding influence.

The soft power logic of interfaith diplomacy also serves domestic objectives of cohesion and legitimacy. In a society where expatriates vastly outnumber citizens, unity cannot depend on ethnicity or sect, but must arise from shared ethical norms. The discourse of tolerance therefore legitimizes governance by aligning state authority with moral leadership. When national identity is defined through values, rather than citizenship, lineage or ideology, loyalty expands beyond tribal or confessional lines. This social contract of virtue has proven remarkably stable, turning moral vocabulary into political glue.

At the same time, interfaith diplomacy provides a non-coercive mechanism for global visibility. Participation in humanitarian responses, peace conferences, and interreligious summits allows the UAE to appear as a constructive global actor independent of regional rivalries. Its leadership in hosting events such as the COP28 Faith Pavilion in 2023 illustrates how moral diplomacy can intersect with global governance agendas like climate action. By integrating ethics, environment, and dialogue, the UAE seeks to position itself as an innovative bridge between civilizations and policy domains.

Ethical Soft Power

Soft power also operates through narrative framing. Emirati media, literature, and film increasingly depict diversity and coexistence as ordinary and desirable. Documentaries on the country's religious communities, features on shared festivals, and social-media campaigns celebrating coexistence normalize religious diversity and coexistence at the level of imagination.

The country's universities and think tanks contribute intellectual depth to this narrative. Research centers such as the Mohammed bin Zayed University for Humanities and the Emirates Policy Center sponsor studies on interfaith ethics,

dialogue methodologies, and intercommunal and intracommunal aspects of Islamic law. These institutions transform moral discourse into academic capital and enhance the UAE's knowledge diplomacy. International collaborations with Vatican and Asian institutions further disseminate Emirati perspectives on coexistence and situate the nation as an intellectual hub of ethical globalization.

By ensuring freedom of worship for its resident communities and facilitating their public celebrations, the UAE also wants to earn the goodwill of millions of expatriates who become informal ambassadors when they return home. The visible harmony of churches, temples, and mosques within a shared skyline projects a powerful message to the wider world: that religious diversity under Islamic leadership is not only possible but prosperous.

The international response to this approach demonstrates its success, with governments, religious organizations, and media outlets praising the UAE's commitment to coexistence. In February 2021, upon receiving the Zayed Award for Human Fraternity, Guterres publicly praised the UAE-hosted human-fraternity initiative and linked it to UN values.[22] This recognition enhances diplomatic leverage and enables Emirati negotiators to invoke moral legitimacy in discussions that extend far beyond religious issues into trade, energy, development, and security. Moral diplomacy thus becomes a multiplier of political credibility.

However, what makes the UAE's model distinct from mere branding is its consistency and institutional depth. Unlike episodic campaigns of "religious tolerance" seen elsewhere, Emirati initiatives are embedded in legal frameworks, ministerial programs, and educational curricula. The National Tolerance Program enumerates concrete objectives such as legislative protection of coexistence, the promotion of intercultural dialogue, and the integration of ethics in professional life. These goals are pursued through measurable actions including training workshops, public-sector guidelines, and research grants. The institutionalization of virtue ensures durability beyond leadership changes.

From a theoretical standpoint, the UAE demonstrates that soft power need not be secular. It represents what some scholars term ethical soft power, the mobilization of moral values as instruments of attraction. As Scott M. Thomas argues, the contemporary resurgence of religion has reintroduced religious ideas, actors, and institutions as sources of authority and legitimacy in international politics and challenged secular assumptions in IR theory.[23] This supports the claim that framing tolerance as divinely grounded can supply a kind of normative legitimacy that purely secular moralities may not generate.

Combining Moral Conviction and Strategic Vision

Moreover, the interplay between moral conviction and strategic benefit forms a feedback loop. Genuine belief in coexistence generates trust; trust enhances influence; influence, in turn, validates the original moral stance. This cyclical relationship allows the UAE to maintain authenticity while pursuing national interest. The dichotomy between altruism and strategy collapses into complementarity. In this sense, the country's interfaith diplomacy represents a new synthesis in global ethics: a model in which doing good and doing well reinforce each other.

The synthesis of moral conviction and strategic vision within the UAE's interfaith diplomacy reveals a sophisticated understanding of how values can serve as the architecture of power. By grounding global engagement in the language of ethics rather than ideology, the state seeks to build legitimacy that will transcend material influence. This type of legitimacy, as theorists of constructivist international relations note, often proves more durable than coercive or transactional forms of power because it shapes norms and expectations. The UAE's cultivation of interfaith dialogue has thus contributed not only to its national cohesion but also to its normative leadership within the wider Islamic and international community.

The depth of this commitment can be measured by continuity across administrations. Successive UAE rulers have all reiterated coexistence as a constitutional principle of governance. This political theology translates into long-term institutional planning: sustained funding for educational programs, regular interfaith conferences, and integration of ethics into public-sector evaluation. These measures confirm that interfaith diplomacy is not episodic image management but a defining component of state identity.

The global resonance of this model has already begun to reshape conversations about religion and diplomacy. Western governments increasingly cite the Emirati example when discussing counter-extremism and multicultural governance. Southeast Asian nations have sought partnerships to study the UAE's civic-education curriculum, while African religious leaders reference its programs in their own peace initiatives. In each case, the UAE's influence is exercised not through persuasion or pressure but through demonstration.

This moral example is reinforced by the integration of interfaith diplomacy with development and humanitarian policy. Emirati aid agencies often collaborate with faith-based organizations across confessional lines, emphasizing common responsibility rather than doctrinal difference. These collaborations extend the country's soft-power network into regions where traditional diplomacy may be constrained. In turn, beneficiaries of such initiatives associate Emirati assistance with ethical generosity, which deepens goodwill that can translate into diplomatic support.

The durability of the UAE's approach will depend on continual renewal, meaning that the state must ensure that interfaith dialogue remains an authentic and uncontrived reality rather than becomes a static slogan. As the population diversifies further, maintaining balance between cultural authenticity and global openness will require dynamic governance and persistent moral leadership. Yet the foundations appear solid. The country's constitutional structure, public institutions, and civic rituals all reinforce the narrative that interfaith diplomacy and the tolerance it strengthens are intrinsic to Emirati modernity. Few states have managed to embed ethics so deeply within the machinery of policy.

Conclusion

This Insight has demonstrated that the United Arab Emirates has crafted a distinctive model of interfaith diplomacy that fuses moral conviction with strategic intelligence. Rooted in Sheikh Zayed's vision of Islam as a faith of goodwill, inclusion and justice, the UAE's commitment to coexistence is not decorative policy but an ethical system woven into its institutions. Through infrastructure, education, and civic culture, the state has translated Islamic virtue ethics into a public language of compassion, turning tolerance and interfaith harmony into the foundation of national identity.

This moral authenticity gives the UAE's diplomacy persuasive force abroad. By aligning its actions with Qurʾānic principles of respect and mutual aid, the country projects credibility that conventional soft-power branding cannot match. Initiatives such as the Abrahamic Family House, the BAPS Hindu Mandir, and the annual Human Fraternity gatherings demonstrate that religious diversity can flourish under Islamic leadership. The consistency of these efforts over decades substantiates sincerity; they are expressions of belief before they are instruments of diplomacy.

Yet the same ethics generate tangible strategic advantages. A reputation for religious tolerance and inclusiveness enhances the UAE's attractiveness to investors, tourists, and international organizations, while enabling it to mediate across cultural divides. The coexistence narrative supports social cohesion in a multi-ethnic population, stabilizes governance, and strengthens multilateral partnerships. In effect, moral credibility functions as an economic and diplomatic resource; as well intended and soft power grounded in authentic virtue rather than image.

Taken together, these dimensions reveal how the UAE has transformed religious coexistence and dialogue from a moral aspiration into a framework of governance and international influence. Its model challenges the assumption that modernization requires secularization, showing instead that faith-based ethics can sustain diversity and prosperity. By converting conviction into policy and belief into diplomacy, the UAE demonstrates that moral authority can be a durable form of power. In a fragmented world, its synthesis of principle and pragmatism stands as both a national success and a potential global paradigm for constructive engagement among civilizations.

Recommendations

The endurance of this model depends on its continual renewal through education, participation, and institutional refinement. As the country's demographic diversity deepens and its global engagements expand, tolerance, including and perhaps especially the living together of confessionally different peoples, must evolve from a celebrated value into an adaptive system of governance and collaboration.

The challenge now is to ensure that the principles of mutual respect and fraternity remain responsive to new social, cultural, and environmental realities. Practical measures can translate the moral and strategic insights of Emirati interfaith diplomacy into lasting structures that reinforce both domestic cohesion and international influence.

The following policy recommendations therefore outline specific steps to consolidate the UAE's achievements and to project its model of moral soft power more effectively across global and generational horizons.

1. Institutionalize Interfaith Education at all Levels

The sustainability of the UAE's interfaith diplomacy depends on continuous moral formation. Educational institutions should embed comparative religion and ethics modules from primary through to tertiary levels, thus training students to approach religious diversity and inclusion as a civic virtue. Teacher-training programs could include certification in dialogue facilitation and intercultural pedagogy. Collaboration with international universities would globalize Emirati scholarship on coexistence and interfaith and generate research exchange that amplifies soft-power influence. Such integration ensures that interfaith dialogue will remain an evolving social competence rather than a ceremonial theme.

2. Develop a National Framework for Community Dialogue

While ministerial initiatives exist, a structured framework linking religious centers, cultural councils, and municipalities would deepen local ownership of coexistence. The government could fund annual community-dialogue grants encouraging joint projects between mosques, churches, temples, and civic associations. Evaluation metrics should emphasize social impact, including the numbers of participants, sustained partnerships, and conflict-resolution outcomes. By decentralizing interfaith, the UAE can transform moral policy into daily practice.

3. Train Diplomats in Interreligious Competence

Given the centrality of moral language in foreign relations, diplomats should receive specialized instruction in religious literacy, intercultural communication, and the theology of peace. The Anwar Gargash Diplomatic Academy could partner with international interfaith institutions to design joint curricula. Continuous professional development in these areas would institutionalize faith-based and ethical diplomacy as a standard skill set. Over time, such training would expand the UAE's credibility as a mediator and moral interlocutor.

4. Leverage Interfaith Centres for Transformational Ideation

Institutions such as the Abrahamic Family House possess untapped potential as permanent venues for genuine knowledge creation and dissemination. Establishing academic research programs that engage meaningfully with key issues, running annual conferences in which ideas can be openly and safely discussed and debated, and hosting overseas academics as researchers would ensure that such centers contribute in powerful ways to the global interfaith movement.

References

1. Bāycar, H., & Rakipoğlu, M. (2022). The United Arab Emirates' religious soft power through 'ulamā' and organizations. Religions, 13(7), 646. https://doi.org/10.3390/rel13070646; Monier, E. (2024). Religious tolerance in the Arab Gulf States: Christian organizations, soft power, and the politics of sustaining the "family–state" beyond the rentier model. Politics and Religion, 17(1), 22–39. https://doi.org/10.1017/S175504832300007X

2. Embassy of the United Arab Emirates. (n.d.). Legacy of Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahyan. https://www.uae-embassy.org/sheikh-zayed-bin-sultan-al-nahyan; Gulf News. (2019, June 4). Tolerance in Shaikh Zayed's thought. https://gulfnews.com/opinion/op-eds/tolerance-in-shaikh-zayeds-thought-1.64361898

3. UAE Government. (n.d.). National Tolerance Program. The Official Portal of the UAE Government. https://u.ae/en/about-the-uae/culture/tolerance

4. The Marrakesh Declaration. (2016). The rights of religious minorities in predominantly Muslim lands: Legal framework and a call to action (Concept paper). https://religiousfreedomandbusiness.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/Marrakesh-Conference-Concept-Paper.pdf

5. Hayward, S. (2016). Understanding and extending the Marrakesh Declaration in policy and practice (Special Report No. 392). United States Institute of Peace. https://www.usip.org/publications/2016/09/understanding-and-extending-marrakesh-declaration-policy-and-practice

6. Bin Bayyah, A. (2018, December 7). Alliance of Virtue — Framework speech. Forum for Promoting Peace in Muslim Societies. https://www.forumforpeace.net/wp-content/uploads/books/2018%20Framework%20Speech.pdf; World Economic Forum. (n.d.). Abu Dhabi Forum for Peace. https://www.weforum.org/organizations/abu-dhabi-forum-for-peace/

7. World Economic Forum. (n.d.). Abu Dhabi Forum for Peace. https://www.weforum.org/organizations/abu-dhabi-forum-for-peace/; Driessen, M. D. (2023). The global politics of interreligious dialogue: Religious change, citizenship, and solidarity in the Middle East. Oxford University Press); Abu Dhabi Forum for Peace. (n.d.). Promoting inclusive citizenship. https://www.forumforpeace.net/

8. Adjaye Associates. (n.d.). Abrahamic Family House. https://www.adjaye.com/work/the-abrahamic-family-house/; Abrahamic Family House. (n.d.). About us. https://www.abrahamicfamilyhouse.ae/about-us

9. Reuters. (2024, February 14). India's Modi opens Hindu temple in Muslim UAE as election nears. https://www.reuters.com/world/indias-modi-opens-hindu-temple-muslim-uae-election-nears-2024-02-14/

10. Taylor, C. (2011). Why we need a radical redefinition of secularism. In E. Mendieta & J. VanAntwerpen (Eds.), The power of religion in the public sphere (pp. 6, 16, 34–50). Columbia University Press.

11. Pope Francis, & Al-Tayyeb, A. (2019, February 4). Document on human fraternity for world peace and living together. Vatican. https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/travels/2019/outside/documents/papa-francesco_20190204_documento-fratellanza-umana.html

12. Higher Committee of Human Fraternity. (n.d.). Higher Committee of Human Fraternity; Our story. https://www.forhumanfraternity.org/

13. Family Development Foundation. (2023, April 4). Family Development Foundation launches 'Neighbors for All' campaign in Abu Dhabi. Media Office—Abu Dhabi. https://www.mediaoffice.abudhabi/en/community/family-development-foundation-launches-neighbours-for-all-campaign-in-abudhabi/
UAE Government. (n.d.). Tolerance and Peace Awards. The Official Portal of the UAE Government. https://u.ae/en/about-the-uae/strategies-initiatives-and-awards/awards/peace
Government of Dubai. (n.d.). Tolerance Day (Mohammed bin Rashid Award for Tolerance). https://mod.gov.ae/tolerance-day/

14. Yang, G., Badri, M., Al Bahar, M., & Al Rashdi, A. (2020). When and where global meets local: A multilevel analysis of determinants of social trust in the Emirate of Abu Dhabi. Asian Social Work and Policy Review, 1–12.

15. Monier, E. (2024). Religious tolerance in the Arab Gulf States: Christian organizations, soft power, and the politics of sustaining the "family–state" beyond the rentier model. Politics and Religion, 17(1), 22–39. https://doi.org/10.1017/S175504832300007X

16. Bin Bayyah, A. (2019, October 28). "Cooperate in goodness and piety": A position paper of the Abrahamic monotheistic religions on matters concerning the end-of-life [Address, Pontifical Academy for Life]. https://www.academyforlife.va/content/dam/pav/documenti%20pdf/2019/Religioni_Cure%20Palliative_28%20ottobre/Testi%20Dichiarazione/Sh%20Bin%20Bayyah%20on%20the%20Position%20Paper%20on%20End-of-Life.pdf

17. World Economic Forum. (2024). Travel & Tourism Development Index 2024. https://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_Travel_and_Tourism_Development_Index_2024.pdf; World Travel & Tourism Council. (2024, April 18). Travel & tourism in the UAE reaches new heights, reveals WTTC. https://wttc.org/news/travel-and-tourism-in-the-uae-reaches-new-heights-reveals-wttc

18. Zayed Award for Human Fraternity. (n.d.). About the award. https://www.zayedaward.org/en/about-the-award

19. UNESCO. (2019, November 16). United Arab Emirates and UNESCO start global tolerance programme for young leaders. https://www.unesco.org/en/articles/united-arab-emirates-and-unesco-start-global-tolerance-programme-young-leaders

20. Monier, "Religious Tolerance".

21. Heo, A. (2023, March 23). Tolerance as tourism? Dual developments in the Arab Gulf. Sightings. https://divinity.uchicago.edu/sightings/articles/tolerance-tourism-dual-developments-arab-gulf

22. United Nations, Office of the Spokesperson. (2021, February 3). Accepting Zayed Award for Human Fraternity, Secretary-General says it recognizes United Nations' work to promote peace and dignity. https://press.un.org/en/2021/sgsm20565.doc.htm

23. Thomas, S. M. (2005). The global resurgence of religion and the transformation of international relations: The struggle for the soul of the twenty-first century. Palgrave Macmillan. See esp. Introduction and chs. 3–4.