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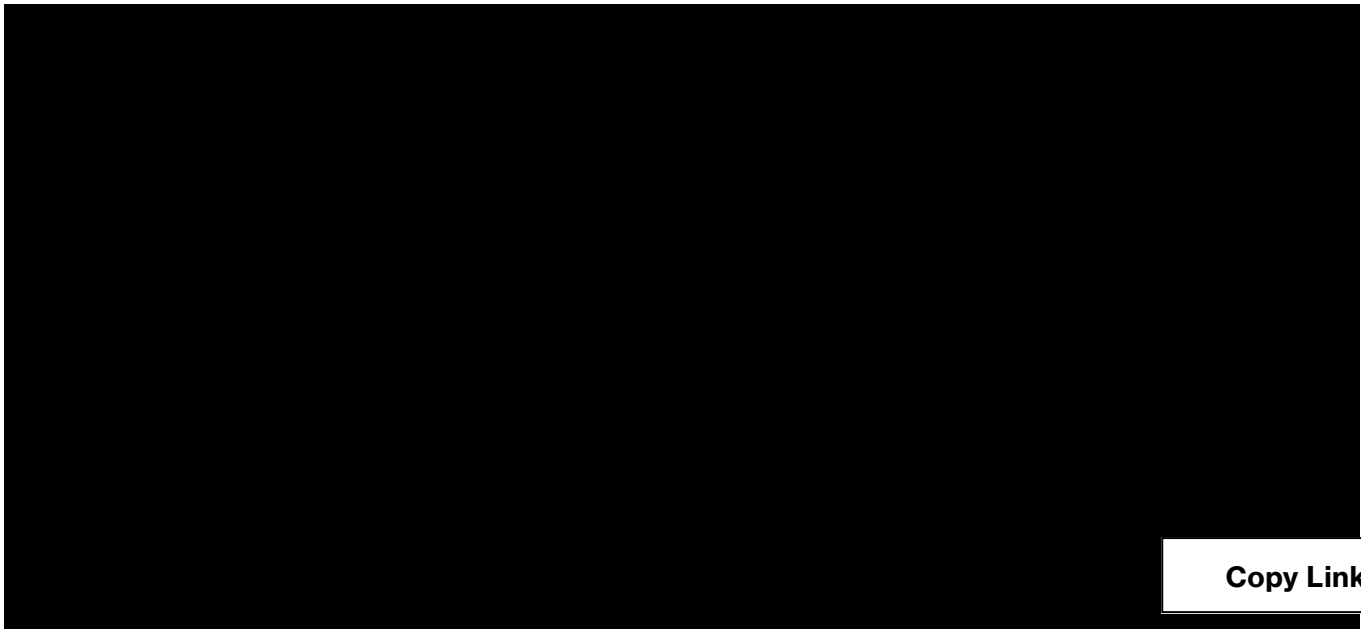
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As the Gulf Warms Up to Israel, a Synagogue Grows in Dubai

The U.A.E. has tried to project a more tolerant image.

By Jonathan Ferziger and Alisa Odenheimer



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Dubai's Hidden Synagogue

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For centuries, Jews did business and mixed socially—if warily—with Arab neighbors from Baghdad to Beirut, but most were expelled or emigrated when Israel was founded in 1948. Today, as the region’s economy grows and attitudes toward Israel soften, a fledgling Jewish community in Dubai has founded that city’s first synagogue.

After meeting for years in one another’s homes, Dubai’s Jews—expatriates in fields such as finance, law, energy, and diamonds—three years ago rented a villa in a quiet residential neighborhood for services. The unmarked building features a sanctuary for prayers, a kosher kitchen, and a few bedrooms for visitors or community members who don’t drive on the Sabbath. “We’ve come a long way since I first started going to Dubai 30 years ago,” says Eli Epstein, a New Yorker who helped found the synagogue and donated a Torah. “Back then, people actually told me that I should avoid using my last name because it sounds too Jewish.”

The synagogue’s emergence from the shadows reflects warming relations between Israel and governments in the region. Leaders of Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates now see Iran as a greater threat than the Jewish state. That has pushed them into an undeclared alliance with Israel and broken long-standing taboos on dealing directly with it. And with Donald Trump seeking a Mideast peace agreement, Arab governments are prodding the Palestinians and Israel to resolve their conflict. In October, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu turned up by surprise in the sultanate of Oman, and two other Israeli government ministers visited the U.A.E. a few days later, Netanyahu publicly defended Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman when he was shunned by other foreign leaders after the murder of Jamal Khashoggi in Turkey.

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▲ Sheikh Nahyan bin Mubarak SOURCE: WORLD TOLERANCE SUMMIT

The U.A.E. in particular has sought to project an image of openness, easing restrictions on religions other than Islam in a campaign aimed at generating more business. The country has appointed a minister of tolerance, who in November sponsored a World Tolerance Summit for 1,200 Muslims, Christians, Hindus, Jews, and others from around the world. “I call on you to work together to eradicate misunderstandings about different religions and cultures,” Sheikh Nahyan bin Mubarak, the minister, told delegates feasting on shrimp salad and lamb at an outdoor plaza amid Dubai’s skyscrapers. Pluralism “must become a positive and creative force for development and stability.”

Members of the synagogue have long asked visitors not to reveal its location or write about its activities, and some are still opposed to speaking openly about it. Public opinion in the U.A.E. is strongly pro-Palestinian; many people there view the warming ties with Israel as a betrayal. And few in Dubai have forgotten that eight years ago Israeli Mossad agents killed a leader of Hamas—the Islamist group that controls Gaza—in a local hotel. But the U.A.E.’s tolerance push has spurred others to conclude that it’s safe to gradually lift the veil. “I’d prefer not to live as a Marrano,” says Ross Kriel, a Johannesburg-born lawyer and a lay leader of the group, referring to people in 15th century Spain who practiced Judaism in secret after forced conversions to Christianity. “The government’s attitude to our community is that they want us to feel comfortable being here, praying here, and doing business here.”

On the Sabbath and Jewish holidays, worshippers—typically a few dozen of the 150 or so members, plus visitors ranging from A-list corporate types to college students—gather in the villa, where the minaret of a nearby mosque can be seen from the windows. Although the congregation has no rabbi, several visit from time to time. When chanting of the weekly portion of the Torah wraps up, the prayer leader intones a traditional Jewish benediction, tailored to local circumstances: “Bless and protect, guard and assist, exalt, magnify, and uplift the president of the U.A.E., Sheikh Khalifa bin Zayed, and his deputy, the ruler of Dubai, Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid, and all the rulers of the other emirates and their crown princes.” After the services, which follow Orthodox liturgy, congregants say the

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prayer over wine and typically sit down to a spread of salads, baked salmon, and a traditional stew called cholent—vegetarian, because there’s no kosher meat in Dubai.

The synagogue has gotten encouragement from Jewish groups such as the [Simon Wiesenthal Center](#), as well as the Dubai government and Mohamed Alabbar, chairman of [Emaar Properties](#), builder of the 163-story Burj Khalifa tower, a 20-minute drive away. When Epstein donated the Torah scroll three years ago, he commissioned a velvet cover with an Arabic inscription embroidered in gold and dedicated it to Alabbar, whom he’s known since they ran an aluminum venture together in the 1990s.

“For decades, anything Jewish was avoided in the Arab world, and explicit signs of Jewishness were risky,” says Ghanem Nuseibeh, a co-founder of political risk consultants Cornerstone Global Associates Ltd., who occasionally visits the synagogue. “A new generation of Arabs and Jews are more culturally accepting of each other.”

BOTTOM LINE - Jewish expats have opened Dubai’s first synagogue amid a tolerance campaign that has eased restrictions on minority religions in the United Arab Emirates.

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