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Religious tolerance in the Arab Gulf states: Christian organizations, soft power, and the politics of sustaining the “family–state” beyond the rentier model

Elizabeth Monier 

Department of Middle Eastern Studies, University of Cambridge, Sidgwick Avenue, Cambridge CD3 9DA, UK

Email: ei211@cam.ac.uk

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Abstract

The states of the Arabian Gulf present a novel case for the examination of relations between authoritarian governance and Christian organizations. The economic clout of the Gulf states has been central to political stability and legitimacy but they are increasingly seeking to expand and consolidate the soft power and resilience through political and diplomatic initiatives. This article examines how the Christian organizations established in recent decades by large migrant communities are incorporated into this strategy and how they are responding. It argues that religious tolerance has formed a central discourse in governmental policies and narratives that construct the Gulf states as modern progressive nations, despite their unique political systems based mainly on constitutional monarchies with limited political participation. This constructs local Christian communities as a source of soft power, despite their position as a religious minority.

Keywords: Arab Gulf Region; Tolerance; Rentier politics; soft power; UAE; Interfaith studies; Public diplomacy; Middle East politics

1. Introduction

In a special issue on relations between Christian groups and the state in the context of authoritarian regimes, an article focusing on the small states of the Arabian Gulf might seem incongruous. However, in terms of examining cases of how relations between Christian groups and the state can be negotiated under conditions in which the former cannot be assured of autonomy by the latter, this case is particularly illuminating. This is due to the uniqueness of the political systems adopted by many of the Gulf states, often basing power around one family, alongside an assumption that Christian actors in countries with no, or very small numbers of, Christian

citizens would not act as a source of soft power for the state. However, the narrative of religious tolerance that has expanded since the early 2000s, and increasingly so post-Arab Spring, has led to growing engagement between state institutions in the small states of the Arab Gulf region and local Christian groups (Fahy, 2018; Monier, 2020b).

The purpose of this article is to examine how and why a state-driven conceptualization of tolerance has expanded in this particular sub-region of the Middle East. Unpacking this development produces two key contributions. The first is thinking about the evolution of the rentier model. The article situates the incorporation of tolerance into national discourse and public diplomacy within a new phase in the political history of these states, in which they are acting on the need to diversify and develop sources of power that extend beyond oil resources. In this phase, ruling families are seeking tools to develop and embed perceptions of sustained development in governmental performance (*taṭwīr mostadām li al-ādā' al-ḥukūmī*). In the earlier phases of the rentier model, the focus was on citizen welfare and the institutionalization of state power structures (Crystal, 1990, 59). The new phase can be situated more broadly into Nye's (1990, 155) framework of a shift toward influencing behavior through soft power in the post-Cold War era, in addition to traditional hard power. Into the 21st century, the "family-state" (Kanna, 2011) is seeking to achieve economic and political sustainability in a mature rentier society (Luciani, 2013; Bertelsen *et al.*, 2017). The article therefore contributes to literature on developments in state-society relations in the Gulf, which tend to be obscured by the focus on oil question and rentierism (al-Zoby and Baskan, 2014, 4).

Secondly, I suggest that the examination of the tolerance discourse sheds additional light on relations between states and non-citizen populations. Given the reality of large non-citizen populations who are segregated in multiple ways from citizen populations (Ilias, 2014, 131), states must construct relations with non-citizen residents in a way that, at the very least, avoids undermining their legitimacy at domestic and international levels. The political regimes, despite their rentier cushions and authoritarian institutions, must balance the need for large migrant populations with the concerns of citizens, in order to maintain power and ensure domestic social cohesion in light of the continuing need for migrants to fuel economic diversification policies. But this balance is also pivotal in the pursuit of policies that sustain the family-state model's legitimacy because the global is increasingly influential. As Rasool and Ruggiero (2022, 391) suggest, "Small states gain precious international recognition and clout by becoming norm and policy entrepreneurs." Mobilizing a strong value-based public diplomacy strategy that develops the soft power capital of the Gulf states is both enhanced and boosted if they can capture the support of both the small local citizen population and the large non-citizen populations. If focusing on religious tolerance and coexistence can contribute to this, the large non-citizen population no longer represent a challenge to state power and social cohesion, as it has been represented in scholarship, but rather a source and space for constructing soft power to influence international forums and agendas through shaping the international dialogue on interfaith matters and the terms of debates on the role of religion in politics; issues that represent a growing concern in international relations and policymaking (Shakman Hurd, 2012).

In order to explore these two aspects, this article draws on analyses of speeches, media coverage, and official policy texts. It also draws on semi-structured qualitative interviews with Christian leaders based in different parts of the Arab Gulf area to understand how they perceive their role as representatives of Christian communities to the state and how they have experienced participation in state policy initiatives around interfaith relations and tolerance. The findings suggest that the history of Christian-ruling family relations has shaped a specific expression of religious tolerance toward Christian groups and this underlies the general trajectory that religious tolerance narratives have taken in this sub-region. The specific content and mobilization of religious tolerance in the national context of each state is further defined according to the vision of each family–state in terms of its domestic social and political priorities, alongside foreign policy objectives (cf. Herb, 2014). The greater the global, diplomatic role conceived for the state, the greater the visibility of religious tolerance in national discourse and in public diplomacy messaging. The article concludes that the incorporation of religious tolerance and coexistence values as sources of soft power locally and globally is an aspect of statecraft that aims to enhance the cultural “attractiveness” of the Arab Gulf states domestically and internationally (Nye, 1990, 166–167) and thereby sustain the power of these regimes beyond the reliance of the rentier framework of state–society relations.

2. Family–states and the rentier model

First, it is helpful to review how the family–states emerged and how the rentier model has been entwined with their development. Prior to World War I, Yannai (2014, 1) describes the states of the Arab Gulf as “weakly united chiefdoms” but argues that they transformed into centralized and nationalized states during the 1930s. This transformation took place under the auspices of the British, who had forged a local colonial regime in the Gulf through the concluding of a series of protection treaties mainly during the 19th century. For the Kuwaiti sociologist Khaldoun al-Naqeeb, the British era resulted in the end of the “natural state” in the Gulf and Arab peninsula (1990) and the consolidation of the authoritarian state (*al-dawla al-tasalluṭīyyah*) that emerged in its place (Al-Naqeeb, 1996). In this model, power was increasingly consolidated in a ruling family with the external support of the British. This power structure was further entrenched by the discovery of oil and the wealth that this would eventually bring to the rulers (Gause, 2015, 14). The increased concentration of power in ruling families through the accumulation of vast oil wealth led to the concept of the rentier state as developed by Beblawi and Luciani (1987). A rentier state is defined as one that receives a large part of its income from external rents, dislocating local production from income generation. A further criterion is that the government should be the primary recipient of this income (Shambayati, 1994, 308). As Diwan’s (2009, 347) term “petrowelfare states” suggests, oil has been the primary source of this income.

Early research on the notion of rentier states suggested that state-controlled distribution of this wealth depoliticized citizens, enabling authoritarian regimes to embed themselves without opposition (Gause, 2015, 140). According to the rentier theory, oil wealth led to a relative decline of the influence of merchant families vis-à-vis

the ruling political class. However, scholarship shows that this process was less linear and homogenous than suggested. Al-Sayegh's (1998, 87) study of Dubai argues that the decline of merchant influence was temporary and that the merchant class continued to contribute to economic affairs and the formulation of political structures. Similarly, according to Kadhim's (2019) analysis of Bahrain, the merchant class were politically central until the 1950s, but their influence declined, not due to increasing political independence of the rulers gained from oil wealth, but as a result of the emergence of new political ideologies among the middle classes. Farah Al-Nakib also points to movements resisting the trajectory that the states were taking under British influence, particularly in the 1950s. This included political opposition movements seeking an end to "ruling family authoritarianism" in Kuwait (Al-Nakib, 2020, 68). This is supported by Crystal (1990) and Yannai (2014, 225), who argue that Kuwait's al-Sabah family realized that some inclusion is a prerequisite for political legitimacy and so despite their weakening prestige the merchant class continued to be vital to Kuwait's transformation. This literature suggests that the incentives provided through oil revenue are not fully able to ensure absolute political power. In fact, for Hootan Shambayati and Theda Skocpol, both working on Iran, oil rents act as a double-edged sword by minimizing conflict in the short-term while storing up state weakness in the longer term (Skocpol, 1982, 270; Shambayati, 1994, 309).

Critiques of the suggestion that rulers have simply "bought out" their citizens also point to the concerted efforts expended by rulers to build up political legitimacy as evidence that the state is less autonomous than the rentier theory implied (Davis, 1991). They also argue that the actions of rentier states in seeking to secure forms of moral or cultural legitimacy are evidence that states are not free and autonomous due to oil rents, at least not in a sustainable way (Craig Jones, 2010, 5–6). Contributing to the nuanced perspectives of rentierism put forward by scholars such as Davis and Gavrielides (1991), Shambayati (1994), and Gause (2015), with their emphasis on cultural and ideological challenges faced by rentier states, this article supports the argument that ruling elites have sought to consolidate power by channeling oil wealth not only into welfare and services that have consolidated power but also into ideological programs of nation building. The impact of rentierism is therefore less about the size of the oil surplus than how this is spent because the impact of oil is not "the simple receipt of oil revenue," but the choices made on how to spend it shape development (Okruhlik, 1999, 297). According to Al-Nakib (2020, 69), the rulers in the Gulf increasingly channeled their resources into the development of tools to support the construction of national identity from the late 1950s onward. I contend that developing the notion of religious tolerance as a national value and aspect of national identity represents a contemporary example of the way in which such nation building and legitimation strategies continue and evolve through the entanglement between local realities and developments in international relations and objectives.

3. Tolerance and state–Christian relations

It is clear then that the rise of what Kanna (2011) terms in his study of Dubai, a "family–state" model was not uncontested nor was the process of consolidating this unique

authoritarian model uniform. However, its early development was linked to both oil and relations with external powers. As well on as welfare and hard power, oil wealth has not only supported but required the developing of value-based, cultural aspects of nation building for the consolidation of power. Oil wealth afforded those in power the opportunity not so much to buy out society but to use that wealth to build “emotive links” with the populace through national identity and construction of authentic values (Davis and Gavrielides, 1991, 12). This article locates the development of tolerance as a value-based program of nation building shaped by the need to sustain power nationally and gain traction in international politics and thereby future-proof the viability of the family-state model. Given the history and structure of state and society in this region, the relationship with non-citizens is also crucial for the state’s stability.

A further dynamic that shapes relations and the specific dynamics between Christian non-citizens and the state in the small states of the Arab Gulf is centrality of informal and personal linkages to the operation of politics in the family-state model (Lefebvre, 2010, 100). As Hedges (2021, 416) argues in his analysis of Emirati foreign policy, it is “on account of the source of power in the national ultimately being concentrated within a single tribe, [that] there is a general appreciation within the country for informal linkages to support policy engagement.” Because it is personal, there is a variation between the Arab Gulf states in terms of the operationalization of religious tolerance as either a discourse, policy, or public diplomacy framework. This is dependent on the local political and socio-economic context, combined with the local histories of relations between ruling families and Christians. The turn of the 20th century marked an uptick in missionary activity in the region, which was focused on developing medical and education institutions (Jebejian, 2018; Murray, 2020; Monier, 2020a). The outcome of this focus was the formation of a strong connection with the local rulers and very tangible contributions to the development of the states and their institutions prior to, and in the early years after, the discovery of oil. According to all my interlocutors, this history at least partially accounts for the strong religious tolerance discourse in these particular Arab Gulf states.¹ This historiography contrasts strongly with missionary history in other parts of the Middle East, such as Egypt (cf. Sharkey, 2008). This contributes to the specificity of the tolerance narrative and its objectives and outcomes to this sub-region of the Middle East.

The Arabian Mission, known locally as the American Mission, was formed in 1889 and adopted by the Dutch Reformed Church in America in 1894 and went on to establish strong links with the local rulers in the area. This was a pivotal development. Bahrain quickly became an important nexus for the mission when Samuel Zwemer opened a dispensary in 1893 (Clarke, 1993, 32–34). Ten years later, the Mason Memorial Hospital was opened. The mission extended its work in Kuwait in 1909 (Scudder, 1998, 178–179). However, when Zwemer first visited Kuwait in 1896 he was asked to leave because the ruler, Sheikh Mubarak, suspected him of proselytization. He and others met with the ruler several times over the following years but the request to open a hospital was rejected each time until an encounter between the ruler and Dr Bennett, who was another member of the Arabian Mission, in 1909. After his medical skills were praised by Sheikh Khaz’al and Naqib al-Ashraf in Basra, Mubarak

asked him to treat a family member. The successful treatment opened the door to the start of a medical mission in Kuwait with Mubarak issuing an invitation to establish a hospital in 1911 (Al-Sabah, 2014, 86–93). The hospital that was built as a result continued to operate until 1967 when the medical mission became obsolete due to Kuwait's increasing wealth and improved infrastructure.

This experience of such personal invitations and the development of direct relations between the rulers and the missionaries was repeated around the region. In addition, the nature of the missionary work in the fields of education and medicine led to the development of a frequently positive reputation of the foreign Christians who came to work in the region (al-Sayegh, 1996). According to local Christian leaders interviewed, there is a common perception that this early positive encounter extends to the present.² For example, in 2019, the Oasis hospital founded by Pat and Marion Kennedy was renamed Kannad hospital in their honor and to recognize their contribution to society in the United Arab Emirates (UAE).³ These local histories of Muslim–Christian encounter are woven into the historiography of state-building. These narratives and the personal nature of the encounters were preserved and incorporated into national history through the consolidation of the family–state model and its paternalistic nature (Hertog, 2016, 346). Together, these dynamics contributed to the configuration and articulation of national identity and values and shaped the way the state cooperates with non-Muslim religious organizations generally and Christian organizations specifically, as an aspect of nation building and state consolidation and legitimation.

4. Mobilizations of tolerance as state policy

Given these local histories and the political concerns shaping the family–states, this raises the question of why the current discourse of tolerance has developed at this specific time. Fahy (2018) notes that the notion of tolerance has proliferated in initiatives and dialogue through the Arab Gulf region since the early 2000s. He situates this in the international political context of post 9/11 and development of responses to violent extremism and agency in developing a discourse of moderate Islam. This is certainly a pertinent assessment of one of the central catalysts for the emergence of the religious tolerance discourse nationally at the turn of the 21st century, and is echoed in several of the interviews I conducted with Christian actors in the region. It is also supported by the growth in publications, initiatives, and institutes focusing on combatting violence extremism and emphasis on promoting moderate Islamic thought (Lacroix, 2019; Kourgiotis, 2020). However, as this tolerance discourse has developed, I suggest that its application has expanded, in particular in the UAE, toward implementing broader socio-political objectives. These objectives align with prioritizing the sustainability of the state and diversification of the economy and explain the particular form and visibility of the tolerance discourse in this region as compared to other parts of the Middle East.

Several of the states in the sub-region have drawn up plans that set out economic, political, and social aspirations in the short to medium term. These include Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030, the Bahrain Government Action Plan 2019–2022 and Bahrain Economic Vision 2030, Oman Vision 2040, UAE Vision 2021, and the

Dubai Plan 2021. While much of the focus is on the economic sustainability aspect, several also introduce social and political objectives. In the National Agenda that is part of the UAE 2021 plan, the first of the seven priorities listed is to support a cohesive society and preserve identity. Among the six points of Dubai plan 2021, the first point focuses on the empowerment of *people*,⁴ the second on supporting an inclusive, cohesive society, and the final one is on establishing a pioneering and excellent government. Similarly, the Bahrain Economic Vision contains a section on society and governance, describing aspirations for efficient and effective government and for a just and thriving society.

Such aspirations point to the recognition of the need to be ambitious in social and political planning, in addition to the economic vision, as the states move into the mature rentier–state era. However, in the case of tolerance, there are questions that should be asked regarding the extent to which this discourse translates to inclusiveness or improved modes of governance for non-citizens generally. Tolerance appears to be applied as a framework for dialogue between cultures and within different social spaces but in practice the focus often falls into terms of interfaith coexistence. The seven pillars of the UAE’s year of tolerance included embedding tolerance in multiple spaces, including in education, in the workplace, and in legislation. However, the key actors engaged in the public enactment of the tolerance discourse are frequently religious leaders.⁵ As a result, while the social and political realities experienced by Christian communities are complicated by the migrant context and stratification of society between citizens and non-citizens, it is through their religious leaders and organizations that engagement in the tolerance discourse has been particularly visible.

In the matter of religious worship, my interlocutors almost universally affirm, whether through interviews or through the author’s observations during meetings and discussions in Kuwait in 2020, that Christians resident in the region perceive that they have freedom to worship and that their religious life is supported by a culture of tolerance led by the state.⁶ Rather it is the issues of acceptance and belonging that are among key pastoral concerns. While the predominant interpretation of tolerance as a narrative of religious coexistence incorporates the religious leaders of the diverse Christian communities into state-sponsored spaces for engagement, the challenges faced by Christian organizations in liaising with governments are implicit in the Gulf Christian Fellowship’s points on government relations.⁷ These include the identification of strategies to address the marginal status of Christians that stems from the perception that they are temporary guests in the state. This perception of incomplete belonging reflects a key concern that the state tolerance discourse, as it currently stands, only partially engages with. The reality is that the vastly outnumbered local population is bolstered by “cultural and ideological solidarity” (Davis and Gavrielides, 1991, 19) in relation to the migrant population. This has fed into the way that national values and identity have evolved.

5. The state and Christians as non-citizens

Due to the realities of hosting large populations of non-nationals, relations with them have had to be addressed in the construction of national ideology and identity, including addressing the questions of religious and cultural diversity. A major

ongoing challenge for the family–state in the development from consolidation towards sustainability of governance is managing the unique reality created by the social make-up of these states. Fargues (2011, 274) maintains that, “Nowhere in the world does the share of the national population comprise such a small proportion of inhabitants.” According to the International Labour Organisation, foreign nationals make up the majority of the population in Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar, and the UAE (and more than 80% of the population in Qatar and the UAE). Furthermore, the UAE hosts the fifth largest migrant populations in the world.⁸ This is largely as a result of the way that the oil industry developed in the region but reflects an existing trend of diverse local trading communities, mainly built around the pearl industry, and the importation of Indian workers by the British to run British colonial affairs (Rumaihi, 2014). When the foreign oil companies arrived, foreign workers were brought in, mainly from India and Britain to fill the managerial and skilled roles. The employees from the local population tended to fill the lower paid unskilled roles, causing resentment towards the non-citizens and oil companies and thereby created a challenge for regime legitimacy (Craig Jones, 2010, 92; Zahlan, 2014, 73–74).

This hierarchy, and the resentment it engendered, was reversed as the oil industry gradually shifted from foreign to local control. In this rentier phase of consolidation, the state’s focus was on citizen welfare but these developments did not reduce the reliance on the migrant workforce because the scale of the required workforce was far beyond what the local population could provide. Asians were also often preferred to Arab workers from other parts of the Middle East, who might be more likely to engage with the local population and seek integration and challenge the family–state model of power (Fargues, 2011, 278). In this period, relations between the state and citizens and the state and non-citizens were configured to reinforce the hegemony of the citizen leading to an “underlying racial construction of citizenship” (Gardner, 2010, 82–83, 152). This reliance on non-Arab migrant labor was particularly high in the smaller Arab Gulf states (Niblock, 2014, 18). While the numbers of European and other western nationals were much smaller, they retained structural privileges that the larger South Asian communities did not (Le Renard, 2021).

There is a body of research on the economic and racial hierarchies and structural inequalities that shape the way non-citizens perceive their status and belonging, as well as how citizens view them and how regimes seek to balance the insecurities of both (cf. Vora, 2013; Kanna *et al.*, 2020; Le Renard, 2021). The socio-economic inequalities that operate alongside this divide shape the experience of migrants in the Gulf according to their country of origin and/or their occupational status which are often linked (cf. Longva, 2019). It is clear that ethnicity, nationality, and socio-economics status are complicating factors in understanding state–non-citizen relations but I aim to complement this literature in this article with a focus on religious communities. The demographic changes sparked by the emergence of oil era did not only introduce the imbalance between citizen and non-citizen and the racial or socio-economic inequalities associated with the region but they also introduced a new religious mix. This demographic shift resulted in Christianity becoming the second largest religion after Islam in much of the region and Catholicism, incorporating Roman and Eastern rite Catholics, is the largest of the Christian groups. According to

the last UAE census, undertaken in 2005, Christians made up 9% of the population (Thompson, 2011, 33). According to Omani census figures, the total population in 2016 was 4.5 million, of which 2.1 million are expatriate workers. Christians constitute 6.5% of the total population, giving a figure of around 300,000 Christians in Oman (Thompson, 2019a, 140). It is for this reason that this article has used state–Christian relations as a case study to understand the history and politics behind contemporary religious tolerance narratives in policy and public diplomacy making.

In fact, it is revealing that tolerance initiatives focus heavily on religious tolerance. Rather than addressing the challenge of social cohesion in the highly stratified and hierarchical structure of society as a racial or nationality question, focusing on religious tolerance is a space in which issues of cohesion and belonging can be engaged with in a way that does not challenge the exclusionary nature of citizenship structures in Gulf states or challenge the state–citizen social contract. There is very little space to alter the policies prevalent across the region which prevents migrants attaining citizenship and a discourse of tolerance does not challenge this status quo directly. A minor exception is in Kuwait which has a small Christian citizen population of less than 300 but prevents, via its nationality law of 1959, non-Muslims from obtaining nationality. Consequently, for migrant communities, which the vast majority of Christians resident across the region are part of, there is clearly an unequal relationship based on their non-citizen status. Despite the centrality of religious tolerance discourse in the development of cooperation between the governments and leaders of the diverse Christian communities in the region of the Arab Gulf, there is little question of altering the balance of power between Christian communities and the rulers of the family–states. In common with these types of hierarchical power structures across the region and of course beyond, the rulers cooperate with non-state actors in ways and within boundaries “that also legitimise the same traditional and cultural values that support the position of the region’s monarchs” (Hedges, 2021, 413–414). In this context, tolerance is not always the same as acceptance and it does not necessarily lead to equality or inclusion (cf Monier, 2020b).

Indeed, this point is perhaps precisely why tolerance has operated so successfully in the Gulf context as a means of promoting co-existence. It does not require equality or integration that would disrupt the complex social balance between the vastly outnumbered citizens and migrants.

6. Tolerance and soft power: local–global diplomacy

The construction and articulation of national values, as part of the process of nation building and consolidation of the family–state model, has also expanded in its influence and application by its contribution to public diplomacy the process of circulating certain messages that attract and engage the audience to develop and harness soft power. Soft power rests on the appeal of ideas domestically and internationally. In fact, the one often enhances the other in terms of legitimacy and foreign policy (Mandaville and Hamid, 2018). Public diplomacy is an essential tool in building a state’s soft power profile, which Nye (2008, 96) suggests rests on three resources; its culture, its political values, and its foreign policies but only when these are seen as having legitimate and moral authority. As Leonard (2002, 9) suggests, “Work on

particular issues will feed off the general image of the country and reflect back on to it – in both positive and negative directions.” For the Arab Gulf states, given their unequal social structures and authoritarian power hierarchies, developing soft power is a crucial element in their statecraft toolkit. This includes responding to issues such as the poor treatment of migrant workers prevalent in the region and the damage this does to the international legitimacy of the Gulf states (Miller, 2016, 255–256).

For small states with limited hard power capabilities, a robust public diplomacy strategy is essential for the regime to maintain stability domestically and to court a role on the world stage through their foreign policy (Zeineddine, 2017; Hedges, 2021). Promoting a discourse of tolerance signals the states’ aim to build global moral leadership, supporting the growing regional and international political ambitions of rulers seeking power in the global neoliberal order despite their authoritarian regimes (Ilias, 2014, 128). This requires contributing to defining the terms of international debate on tolerance and coexistence, such as through the development of declarations of human fraternity and coexistence in the UAE in 2019, the Bahrain declaration of 2017, or Oman’s touring exhibition established in 2009, entitled *Religious Tolerance: Islam in Oman*. In such ways, the narrative of tolerance has taken on an increasingly visible role in policy messaging domestically and abroad.

For Oman, tolerance forms one of five principles in its foreign policy strategy⁹ and supports Oman’s diplomatic role as a mediator, even being described as the “Switzerland of Arabia” (Worrall, 2021). This is reinforced through domestic interactions with, and public messaging pertaining to, international residents, which builds soft power to support diplomatic objectives, thereby bolstering the legitimacy of the regime both domestically and globally (Nye 2019). Christian institutions, among others, represent valuable legitimating partners for the Gulf states and for state management of religious identity that supports state. According to Justin Meyers, Executive Director of al Amana Centre, a Christian organization in Oman, this is not just branding but represents a framework for the cooperation between the center and the state on interfaith matters.¹⁰ In such ways, religious tolerance as a discourse of state–society relations and values represents another way in which non-citizens act as a source of soft power legitimizing the political authority of family–states (cf Vora, 2011, 122).

Given the diverse, international composition of the residents in the Gulf states, media and government communications about domestic relations with these communities also have clear soft-power potential at the level of bilateral diplomatic relations, as noted by Lefebvre (2010, 111) in his analysis of the Indian community in Oman. Therefore, “domestic” stories in the media can often then be as important as the more obviously foreign policy-relevant stories (Leonard, 2002, 13). This is visible across many parts of the region in the messaging of national media, as well as the social media content produced by local Christian communities. To give three examples, Rev. Ammanuel Gharib, a Kuwaiti citizen and leader of the National Evangelical Church of Kuwait, appears frequently in the Kuwaiti and pan-Arab to talk about the freedom granted to Christian worship in Kuwait.¹¹ In October 2021, Prince Salman bin Hamad Al Khalifa, Crown Prince and Prime Minister, received the Apostolic Vicar of Southern Arabia and Apostolic Administrator of Northern

Arabia, Bishop Paul Hinder, at Riffa Palace, and confirmed “Bahrain’s commitment to religious tolerance.”¹² The story was reported by a Gulf news agency but also reposted by the Catholic church in Bahrain’s Facebook page.¹³ This was followed by extensive coverage of Pope Francis’ visit to Bahrain in November 2022, much of which was broadcast live via networks such as Sky News Arabia and also via Catholic-affiliated social media and news networks. While such events are perhaps most visible in western and local media, they are not exclusively limited to western Christian organizations. In 2012, The Supreme Head of Indian Malankara Orthodox Church and Catholicose of All The East Moran Mar Baselios Marthoma Paulose II visited the UAE. During the visit, he referred to the coexistence of different religions in the UAE, and in 2015, he instructed all church members in the UAE to actively participate in the “UAE Compassion” campaign that was seeking donations for Syrian refugees.

The values and leadership promoted through the interfaith and tolerance messaging highlighted in these brief examples do not only operate at national or international levels but also globally in the sense that the Christian communities belong to multiple nationalities but at the same time to a community of religious globality. As Bryan S. Turner (2011) suggests, societies have become increasingly multicultural as a consequence of globalization and the visibility of religion in the public sphere has expanded. Due to the social structure of the small states of the Arab Gulf, the parameters of the public dialogue of religious pluralism have been global. For example, Catholics in the Gulf, who make up the largest Christian grouping across the region and belong to diverse national or linguistic communities primarily from South Asia, are also linked to the global Catholic church. The visit of the Catholic Pope to the UAE in 2019 was a hugely successful public diplomacy initiative,¹⁴ both at the domestic and the international level in terms of generating goodwill and promoting the UAE as a major international partner in interfaith and humanitarian affairs.¹⁵ It also enhanced the strategic tolerance message that has been shaping the discourse of national values in several of the Gulf states in recent years.

This was repeated by the Papal visit to Bahrain in November 2022, when the Pope participated in a conference titled “East and West for Human Coexistence,” continuing the themes of the UAE visit and mobilizing interfaith participation from across the region. The continuation of such initiatives at the international level, particularly in Oman, Bahrain, and the UAE, demonstrates the ongoing role of the religious tolerance discourse within public diplomacy initiatives and Christian institutions represent obvious partners in this. In these ways, non-citizen residents are central to developing public diplomacy messaging pertaining to coexistence and (managed) inclusivity as an increasingly valuable tool for domestic as well as foreign policy by acting as a source of soft power.

7. Religious tolerance in national policy and public diplomacy messaging: the case of the UAE

The most proactive of the Gulf states in incorporating religious tolerance into a public diplomacy strategy is the UAE. According to the Rev. Canon Dr Andrew Thompson, who served as an Anglican chaplain in the Arab Gulf region between 2006 and 2020,

the past decade in the UAE has witnessed “an evolving policy of government-church relations.” According to him, this started informally and largely due to the personal interests of a federal minister who had been entrusted with an interfaith mandate.¹⁶ This informal relationship has gradually and increasingly been institutionalized in the UAE. Kourgiotis (2020, 5–6), confirms that the UAE has institutionalized tolerance domestically while also promoting the “Emirati model” internationally through a process of enacting laws and policies during the period 2014 to the present. In a speech titled “Wisdom of the Ruler,” Sheikh Zayed, who is considered to be the founding father of the UAE, speaks about tolerance as a duty, “*al-tasāmuḥ wājib*.”¹⁷ This illustrates how tolerance is mobilized to define the historical memory of the state in ways that feed in to the UAE’s developing tolerance narrative as a national value with an international role to play.

Tolerance is also a connecting narrative that links the experience of Christian organizations in their relations with the state with government policy-making priorities both at home and abroad. The partnership of many of the states in the Arab Gulf region with local Christian organizations and leaders thereby illustrates how “the socio-cultural grounding of diplomatic practices among the GCC states forms an important aspect of their foreign relations” (Hedges, 2021, 414). Although Christians are not the only non-Muslim partner, the link between Christianity and western powers and audiences perhaps makes Christian leaders appear more visible in the sphere of international relations. Christianity also represents the largest religious community worldwide. The initiatives involving Pope Francis are perhaps the clearest example of this international outreach but other Christian leaders, including the Archbishop of Canterbury and American Evangelical leaders have also participated in interfaith dialogue forums hosted by the UAE.

A clear way in which the value of religious tolerance has become institutionalized domestically is the establishment of the Ministry of Tolerance and the launch of the National Program for Tolerance in 2016. The appointment of a minister of tolerance formalized the existing relationship between the church and state and Christian leaders were invited to participate in “an agenda which called for religious tolerance to be a visible trait in the UAE,”¹⁸ through conferences, and interfaith dialogue. This built on goals outlined in the first session of the Forum for Promoting Peace in Muslim Societies held in 2014 and which Kourgiotis (2020, 5) describes as “The cornerstone of Abu Dhabi’s strategic communication.” The goals again combined a vision for national values with an international message that “reinforces the role of the UAE in spreading peace.”¹⁹ The Vatican and Non-Muslim religious organizations in the UAE were included on the list of partners in the national tolerance program, alongside government ministries, universities, research centers, and embassies.

Such a framework of cooperation that incorporates different types of non-governmental actor is also about equipping the current rulers to simultaneously meet social, economic, and political challenges faced by the UAE today. Chief among them is security, an aspect of which pertains to the threat of extremist ideologies. In 2012, Hedayah was launched as a center for countering violent extremism, followed by the Sawab Centre which was co-founded with the USA in 2015 as a further forum for countering extremist ideologies. In 2017, the International Centre for Tolerance was launched “to provide solutions to the challenges of extremism and

promote the UAE as a role model for tolerance.”²⁰ The establishment of such institutes and holding of conferences is supported by strategic messaging by the state and local and international Christian figures. In an article published in UAE news platform *The National*, the UAE government used the occasion of Christmas Eve to proclaim “its message of tolerance, hope and peace...to a world confronting the darkness of militant extremism” (Pennington, 2016). The article included quotes from local Christian leaders referring to the tolerance experienced in the UAE by Christians. Cooperation in terms of confronting the challenge of religious extremism through cooperation via the framework of religious tolerance is confirmed in the frequency of such public messaging in the media, ministerial speeches, and through interviews with Christian leaders based in the region.²¹

Both states and Christian actors have sought to develop this. On the part of the churches in the region, the Gulf Churches Fellowship (GCF) was formed in 2012 in recognition of the need for regional cooperation to support partnerships with “the governments and local societies in fostering a climate of interfaith harmony that goes beyond tolerance to the building greater knowledge and acceptance of the ‘other’” (Monier, 2020b, 104). In the GCF declaration of 2018, signed in Abu Dhabi, one of the four core tasks of the fellowship was to seek “collaborative relationships with our respective host governments.”²² The archaeological discoveries of the ancient Christian communities in the region have been one way in which local authorities and Christian leaders have built a narrative together about Christian presence. According to my participation in the GCF annual meeting in 2020 and interviews with some of the representatives of different Christian communities in the region, officials have arranged for visits to the sites as a forum for discussing tolerance and coexistence.²³ The dynamics of this relationship continue to evolve, alongside political and social developments, with both sides adapting their goals and organizations. However, they have become increasingly institutionalized with the formalizing of this relationship bringing complications as well as opportunities as local Christian leaders seek to navigate this process and the impacts on their communities. The most recent example of this being the establishment of the Department of Community Development in Abu Dhabi,²⁴ concerned with the inclusion of all residents in society.²⁵

It is clear that the priorities of the governments have led to opportunities for Christian organizations to advocate for their communities, using the leverage of religious tolerance and its centrality to nation-building and foreign policy goals. Likewise, the governments benefit from the connections formed with local non-Muslim partners due to the social capital generated through this cooperation and support for the state’s public script of tolerance. Religious tolerance again performs the dual task of promoting cohesion between citizens and non-citizens and between citizens and the state by reaffirming tolerance as a defining national value with added global attractiveness. This explains why significant emphasis is attached to the UAE’s most important founding figure, Shaikh Zayed Bin Sultan Al Nahyan, and his articulation of tolerance as a founding national ideal (cf al-Suwaidi, 2019). As stated in the introduction to the National Program for Tolerance launched in 2016, “Tolerance is an intrinsic value and a key trait of the

UAE social fabric”²⁶ and as a “*khaliji*” [Gulf] contribution to global, moral debates on religion, politics, and coexistence.

8. Conclusion

Kanna argued that “oil saved the family-state” (2011, 53) but this article argues that the family–state authoritarian model, the consolidation of which was made possible by the rentier framework, is seeking to move into a mature rentier phase. This requires an economic strategy through diversification (Ewers, 2016) but also a socio-political element to expand and sustain legitimation of the regimes. If classic rentierism focuses on the economic consolidation of Gulf regimes, and revisionist rentierism emphasizes the ideological and cultural consolidation of state–society relations with citizens, the Arab Gulf politics of the 21st century have become increasingly about sustainability of regimes beyond legitimation derived from rents. The family–states must develop tools of governance that are directed at citizens but also at the reality of their large non-citizen populations. Religious tolerance, interfaith initiatives and partnership with local Christian organizations and leaders form part of a strategy for developing political sustainability of the incumbent governance model beyond oil.

The increasing incorporation of religious tolerance initiatives into government planning and messaging suggests that while the discourse of tolerance may have indeed emerged initially as a response to international political developments, it has evolved into a wider strategy. This region in particular has adopted this strategy based on local historical, and social and political factors. Tolerance represents a narrative that addresses rulers’ foreign policy ambitions, and seeks to sustain domestic legitimacy by upholding social cohesion in societies made up of small numbers of citizens and large numbers of non-citizens, while at the same time constructing and reinforcing local identity and values. The states have been able to do this by drawing on a historiography of cooperation and productive relations between Christian missionaries and rulers.

In conclusion, the mobilization of the tolerance narratives that have emerged from this context legitimize the particular authoritarian model found in this region in two ways: first, the construction of a discourse of national values and identity as upheld and protected by the regime. Second, via a public diplomacy role that strengthens and diversifies the resources of soft power available to the Arab Gulf in both regional and international forums. The limits on the tolerance discourse in terms of inclusion of non-citizens has less to do with the religious identity of Christians than the purpose of the mobilization of tolerance for the family–states, which is the sustainability of power in a mature rentier phase and in planning for a post-oil order.

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Notes

1. Author interview with the venerable Dr Bill Schwartz, Archdeacon of the Gulf and Dean of St Christopher’s Anglican Cathedral in Manama, Bahrain, August 2018; author interview with Fr. Mathew Francis, Vicar General, Vicariate of Kuwait, December 2016; author interview with Dr Hrayar Jebejian, Secretary General of the Bible Society in the Gulf, March 22, 2018; author interview with Rev.

Christopher Butt, Anglican Minister and former Dean of St Christopher's Anglican Cathedral, Bahrain, July 28, 2018.

2. Author interview with Dr Hrayar Jebejian, Secretary General of the Bible Society in the Gulf, March 22, 2018; author interview with Rev. Christopher Butt, Anglican Minister and former Dean of St Christopher's Anglican Cathedral, Bahrain, July 28, 2018.

3. Crown Prince thanks the family of Abu Dhabi's first doctors. *The National*. December 15, 2019. <https://www.thenationalnews.com/uae/health/crown-prince-thanks-family-of-abu-dhabi-s-first-doctors-1.955531>

4. Author's emphasis because it contrasts to the more common use of the term "citizen" in this and similar documents to presumably include non-citizens as well.

5. As a representative example of the media framing of the UAE's year of tolerance, see John Dennehy. December 17, 2018. From Sikh to Christian, religious leaders gear up for UAE's Year of Tolerance. *The National*. <https://www.thenationalnews.com/uae/government/from-sikh-to-christian-religious-leaders-gear-up-for-uae-s-year-of-tolerance-1.803393>

6. Author interview with Fr. Mathew Francis, Vicar General, Vicariate of Kuwait, December 2016; author interview, Schwartz (2018). Author interview with Jebejian (2018).

7. Gulf Churches Fellowship. Government relations. <http://gulfchurches.org/collaboration/government-relations/> accessed October 24, 2021.

8. Labour Migration, International Labour Organisation, <https://www.ilo.org/beirut/areasofwork/labour-migration/lang--en/index.htm#:~:text=In%202019%2C%20according%20to%20the%20Population%20Division%20of,Lebanon%2C%20of%20whom%2031%20per%20cent%20were%20women> [accessed October 1, 2021].

9. Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Oman. Policy Principles. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d5y85yWB6Kc> [accessed October 24, 2021].

10. Author Interview, Rev. Justin Meyers, Executive Director, al Amana Centre, Oman. November 4, 2021.

11. For example, YouTube User Sky News 'Arabiya. 2019. Hadath al-'Arab al-Qis 'Ammanuel 'Gharib Deef. March 1. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9emJyMnqdig> [accessed October 28, 2021]; Garcia, Ben. 2016. Christians are happy about religious tolerance in Kuwait. *Kuwait Times*. December 25. <https://news.kuwaittimes.net/website/christians-happy-religious-tolerance-kuwait/> [accessed October 28, 2012].

12. Gulf Daily News. 2021. Bahrain "Committed to Religious Tolerance". October 8. <https://www.gdnonline.com/Details/979525> [accessed October 10, 2021].

13. Sacred Heart Catholic Church Bahrain October 8, 2021. <https://www.facebook.com/SHCBahrain/photos/a.220219778154969/2000472296796366/> [accessed October 11, 2021].

14. According to the impressions articulated by Christian leaders from across the region at a meeting of the Gulf Churches Fellowship annual meeting attended by the author in January–February 2020 in Kuwait.

15. Author interview with Rev. Dr Andrew Thompson, Anglican priest, formerly Anglican Chaplain in Kuwait 2006–2010 and Abu Dhabi 2010–2020. October 2021.

16. Ibid.

17. Al-Maktaba al-Sawtiya li al-Sheikh Zayed. <https://play.google.com/store/apps/details?id=com.zayed.audio.library&hl=ar&gl=US>

18. Ibid.

19. Author's translation. "t'aziz dūr al-imārāt al-'arabiyya al-mutaḥida fi nashr al-silm." Website of the Forum for Promoting Peace in Muslim Societies. Online <https://peacems.com/about-us/brief/goal/> [accessed October 15, 2021].

20. UAE Government, "Center for Countering Extremism." Online: <https://u.ae/en/about-the-uae/culture/tolerance/centers-for-countering-extremism> [accessed October 19, 2021].

21. Author interview with Jebejian (2018); author interview with Thompson (2021).

22. GCF Abu Dhabi Declaration 2018 <http://gulfchurches.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/Abu-Dhabi-Declaration-2018-English-signed.pdf>

23. Author interview with Jebejian (2018); author interview with Thompson (2021).

24. Department for Community Development, <https://addcd.gov.ae/en> (October 20, 2021).

25. Author interview Thompson (2021).

26. UAE National Program for Tolerance. June 2016. P. 3. <https://u.ae/-/media/About-UAE/Tolerance/National-Program-for-Tolerance-Eng.ashx>.

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Dr E. Monier is an assistant professor of modern Arabic studies at the University of Cambridge. Her research encompasses the contemporary history and politics of the Arab World, focusing mainly on Egypt, Iraq, and the Arab Gulf states.

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