



The Jewish Community in the United Arab Emirates

Updated: January, 2022

The [Abraham Accords](#) were launched with a normalization agreement between Israel and Arab countries, including the United Arab Emirates (UAE), which were signed on the White House Lawn on September 15, 2020.

Since the Accords were announced, amid rapidly expanding ties between the State of Israel and the UAE, the small **Jewish community** of the UAE has increasingly emerged from the shadows. In February 2021, the Dubai Community Development Authority granted the Jewish community its initial license for religious worship, setting the stage for a more robust sense of home for the country's Jewish residents. Later that month, a regional alliance anchored by the UAE Jewish community – the [Association of Gulf Jewish Communities](#) – was launched.

The Community's Short History

The first Jewish individuals who would ultimately become community builders had arrived in Dubai by 2008. A small number of Jews had been living quietly in the country before that time, but generally did not have contact with each other. Mutual acquaintances in their home countries connected some of the Jewish residents of the UAE to each other, which led to some initial meetings. Over time, a small group began to quietly take shape, with Jewish families gathering for Shabbat meals and festivals in private homes.

In 2014, a handful of Dubai's Jews started praying together in a private home on Shabbat mornings, and by 2015, the growing community of families led by Ross and Elli Kriel, rented a villa where religious services were held – constituting the first new Jewish community established on the Arabian Peninsula in centuries. Meanwhile in the UAE's capital, Abu Dhabi, Jewish students and faculty of New York University Abu Dhabi had been gathering for holidays and cultural events since the campus opened in 2010. In these early days, the community was unofficial and had not yet applied for the government approval and recognition required of religious and other groups under UAE law.

In 2016, communal members were asked to contribute a chapter about the Jewish community to a book on minority religions in the UAE. The book, **“Celebrating Tolerance: Religious Diversity in the United Arab Emirates,”** was published by the UAE Ministry of Tolerance in 2019. In a growing signal of initial openness, the UAE government declared 2019 as the **“Year of Tolerance,”** and at around the same time, informal and unofficial contacts between the UAE and the State of Israel were expanding.

The same year, the UAE's Crown Prince Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed announced plans to build the [Abrahamic Family House](#), a multi-faith campus and educational center consisting of a mosque, a church, and a synagogue, scheduled to open in 2022/2023. His Highness Sheikh bin Zayed received the gift of a Torah Scroll on November 25, 2019, the first Torah ever dedicated to an Arab ruler. As a result of these developments, more and more Jewish residents began to feel increasingly comfortable publicly acknowledging their Jewish identities, and

joining the growing community. However, it was only once the Accords were signed that the community began to truly emerge into the public view.

The UAE Jewish Community Today

There are estimates that the UAE is now home to around 2000 Jews, from all over the world, only one of whom has been granted UAE citizenship (Emirati citizenship is conferred only by birth to Emiratis, or through marriage, or other very select circumstances). About half of this number has arrived in the UAE since the Accords were signed. The number of Jews who are active in communal life is smaller, and varies with the seasons and with tourism. Some 250 - 500 individuals attend gatherings on Jewish holidays in Dubai and Abu Dhabi, including tourists. Approximately 80% of the resident Jewish community lives in Dubai, 20% live in the Emirate of Abu Dhabi, and a small number live across the country's other five emirates. In September of 2021, a weekly Shabbat service was established in Abu Dhabi.

The resident Jewish population is a blend of expats; with many originating in the United States, Israel, Canada, the United Kingdom, France, Belgium, Germany, and Switzerland. There are also community members from Australia, South Africa, and South America, as well as a small number from regional countries including Lebanon and Egypt.

Different Jewish denominations are represented within the community, and most community members are non-observant. For practicing Jews, the first unofficial congregations to be created were Orthodox. Others, including an Egalitarian group, have since formed. There are now five to six different informal congregations that gather for services, and numerous communal members worship across the various gatherings.

Since the Abraham Accords opened the country to Israeli citizens, there has been substantial Israeli and international Jewish interest in the UAE, and a massive influx of Israeli visitors (both Jewish and Arab) to the country. Dozens of kosher companies, supervisors and tour operators have begun to launch facilities and services. In 2019, Elli Kriel established the first kosher catering service, Elli's Kosher Kitchen, serving a blend of kosher and Emirati cuisine that she has termed "kosherati." More recently, the country's [first kosher restaurant](#) opened in Dubai's Burj Khalifa, the tallest building in the world; followed by several other kosher establishments. The Ministry of Tourism in Abu Dhabi has sent a [directive](#) to all of the city's hotels, instructing them to offer certified kosher foods to all those who make such a request.

According to communal leaders, many members feel they can now express their "whole selves" more fully and openly. At the same time, the sudden growth is causing some to feel a little lost or overwhelmed within their once intimate and tight-knit community, especially given the large influx of Jewish tourists and visitors – many from Israel. The tiny community is experiencing growing pains, as it finds itself newly open to the world, and without the resources and scale of membership of communities in other large cities.

The **Jewish Council of the Emirates** (JCE) has continued to represent Jewish residents to governmental agencies and Jewish organizations around the world, under the leadership of Rabbi Yehuda Sarna of New York University who serves as the community's non-resident Chief Rabbi, and the JCE's co-Presidents, Alex Peterfreund and Thierry Braha. Ross Kriel, who founded the JCE, now serves as the Jewish Representative to the Community Development Authority. Additionally, Rabbi Dr. Elie Abadie, formerly of New York's Safra Synagogue, is the community's resident Senior Rabbi. Rabbi Abadie oversees a weekly minyan, Shaarei Mizrah. Ross Kriel oversees another weekly synagogue service called the Minyan on the Palm. **Chabad** operates in both Dubai and Abu Dhabi under the direction of Rabbi Levi Duchman, and has set up services to accommodate both residents and tourists. Rabbi Bruce Lustig of the Washington (DC) Hebrew Congregation, a Reform temple, serves on the Emirate's High Committee for Human Fraternity

In 2021, **The Jewish Federations of North America** (JFNA) appointed Jean Candiotte, a leader in the community and a Board Member of the JCE, as its UAE consultant, supporting visiting delegations.

In early 2022, the Abraham's Miracles Centre for Learning (known as the **AMCL Center**), a community cultural hub in the Al Safa neighborhood, will open to house events, facilitate Jewish-Emirati encounters, and host visiting delegations for briefings with the community. The center, under the board leadership of Ali Cuizon-Conway, had a soft opening in October 2021, when it hosted a small delegation from the Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, DC. Sharing the campus, in an adjacent building, is the **Mini-Miracles Nursery School**, run by Chabad. Chabad also runs other educational activities, including a weekly Friday Talmud Torah for the community's children, as well as the youth group CTeen for Jewish teenagers.

The JCE's previous, secret "synagogue-villa," home to the community from its earliest days, was closed in 2020 due to a request from the government and security precautions. The congregation continues to meet in hotels and other venues until a more permanent solution is found.

In the long term, the community envisions building one permanent center that includes synagogue space and sanctuaries that accommodate different forms of Jewish practice; office space for international Jewish organizations; and a cultural center for conferences, cultural exchanges, and community programs. There have also been discussions about building a Jewish school, in coordination with Ambassador Ronald Lauder.

Meanwhile the UAE's relations with the State of Israel continue to grow at a rapid pace. The two countries have opened embassies and exchanged ambassadors, and continue to sign trade, research and other agreements of cooperation. In December 2021 Israel's Prime Minister Naftali Bennett made an historic trip to the UAE, which was followed by a January 2022 state visit by Israel's President Isaac Herzog, accompanied by First Lady Michal Herzog.

In addition, in September 2021, former US Ambassador to Israel David Friedman launched the "[Friedman Center](#)" to advance peace made by Abraham Accords, and in October 2021, [a new caucus](#) in Israel's Knesset was formed to promote the Abraham Accords. The bipartisan caucus is headed by Coalition Blue and White MK Ruth Wasserman Lande and Opposition Likud MK Ofir Akunis. Two months later, former Senior Presidential Advisor and son-in law of former US President Donald Trump, Jared Kushner, announced the launch of the Abraham Accords Peace Institute ([AAPI](#)). The group aims to promote cultural and economic ties among Abraham Accord states, which includes bringing influencers across different fields and expertise to experience their fellow Accord countries. And in January 2022, a bipartisan group of US Congress members launched the [Abraham Accords Caucus](#) to further promote the peace initiative.

International Jewish Organizations in the UAE

JFNA's traditional partners **The Jewish Agency for Israel** and **The American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee** (JDC) are both actively involved in the new UAE Jewish community, each taking leading roles. While JFNA's partners' efforts are emblematic of many of their normal activities, they are also distinct as they work to meet the needs of this new and growing community, sometimes providing a different type of footprint than what is sometimes seen in other Jewish communities.

The Agency has dispatched shlichim (emissaries) to the region, with the goal of supporting Jewish life in the Gulf, and strengthening relations with Israel. Following the work of its first emissary, Justin Korda, the Agency sent two shlichim to Dubai to provide educational programming at the AMCL Center starting in 2022. Their work will focus on promoting Jewish identity and knowledge, as well as developing connections between the Jewish

community and Israel. In addition to the shlichim, the Agency has also appointed Sarah Besnainou as its local representative.

Similarly, JDC has sent several JDC Fellows to Dubai. Jake Berger is the current JDC Entwine Global Jewish Service Corps Fellow for 2021 – 2022, working as the manager of the new AMCL Center, which is to become the home for Jewish cultural life in Dubai (see above). All have been working to serve the needs of the Dubai Jewish community as it grows and evolves. This effort is part of JDC's efforts to bolster Jews and Jewish communities in the Arab world.

The American Jewish Committee (AJC) began operating a regional office in Abu Dhabi in late 2021, with its official opening scheduled for February 2022. Ambassador Marc Sievers serves as its Director and Reva Gorelick as its Assistant Director.

The organization **Visions of Abraham** (VOA) formed in 2021, in response to the influx of visiting delegations, to manage and serve their needs, and assist them in engaging with all aspects of the Jewish world in the UAE. VOA was founded and is assisted by founders and leaders of the Jewish community.

The **Crossroads of Civilizations Museum**, located in the historic district of Dubai, has exhibited artifacts from the Jewish world since 2012. In 2021, Founder H.E. Ahmed Al-Mansoori opened **the first Holocaust Memorial Exhibit in the Arab world**. The Museum welcomes delegations from around the globe, and importantly – local visitors and school groups – advancing Holocaust education in the UAE.

In 2021, the international **documentary “Amen-Amen-Amen”** premiered. The film traces the origins of the UAE's first Jewish community, and tells the story of the gifting of the special Torah to the UAE's Crown Prince, H.H. Sheikh bin Zayed.

As the United Arab Emirates rapidly opens to Israel and the Jewish world, there is significant and growing interest in the country's emerging Jewish community. The community takes pride in its historic role in the advancement of peace and tolerance, as it prepares for a new chapter in its history.

For more information, please contact JFNA's [Dani Wassner](#), Director of Communications and Government Relations in Israel.