

# Sheikh Nahyan bin Mubarak al-Nahyan on promoting tolerance in the UAE and abroad

*A Ministry for Tolerance in the United Arab Emirates? That is rather intriguing and perhaps a world's first. It becomes less intriguing, however, when it is considered that approximately 200 nationalities with various religious backgrounds live and work in the United Arab Emirates. People of all ethnicities and creeds are constantly streaming in and out of Abu Dhabi's and Dubai's airports.*

*Don't be surprised then to see a church next door to a mosque named "Mariam, Umm Eisa," Arabic for "Mary, Mother of Jesus." That mosque in Al Mushrif district was previously named Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed Mosque and was renamed on the orders of Abu Dhabi Crown Prince Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed al-Nahyan.*

*The Ministry for Tolerance was established by royal decree in February 2016. Groundbreaking measures, such as a law against discrimination and hate and a measure against sexual harassment, preceded the creation of the ministry.*

*In addition, the International Institute for Tolerance was established last June, along with the international Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid al-Maktoum Tolerance Award.*

*Even before his appointment as minister of state for tolerance, Sheikh Nahyan bin Mubarak al-Nahyan was known for opening his majlis – salons – to guests of different religions and races. They were recognised by their garb and headgear. Having diverse majlis is a tradition in the UAE started by UAE founder Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan al-Nahyan, which is not surprising since Muslims and non-Muslims have throughout history lived in harmony in the emirates.*

*How does the ministry intend to do just that and how is its work intimately connected with education? Was the ministry a result of a reaction to certain events or was it part of a principled approach to shaping a new UAE society?*

*Sheikh Nahyan granted an interview to discuss these issues.*

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**The Arab Weekly (TAW):** The UAE might be the first among the world countries to create a Ministry for Tolerance. Was that in answer to a particular social or political need or was it part of a wider plan?

**Sheikh Nahyan:** Creating a Ministry for Tolerance in the UAE is part of giving form to a fundamental principle underlying the evolution of the state itself since its birth in the '70s of the past century. Among the principle values supporting the UAE is respect for other civilisations and cultures. The UAE has always sought to strengthen the bonds of friendship and affection among people.

**TAW:** There are some who say the existence of a state institution like the Ministry for Tolerance is a novelty in governance. Is it a temporary reaction bound to come to an end?

**Sheikh Nahyan:** The establishment of a Ministry for Tolerance in the UAE was not a reaction to a particular event nor was it for the specific purpose of countering a malignant phenomenon. Rather, it was a fundamental part in the development of this state and a strong expression of its sure commitment to playing a leading role worldwide in strengthening all noble human values.

I must also insist that the ministry will accomplish its mission by eradicating extremism and radicalism from society and spreading tolerance and peaceful coexistence around our country and the world.

**TAW:** What is meant by tolerance? Is it just religious tolerance or much more than that?

**Sheikh Nahyan:** Achieving religious tolerance is, of course, very important to any society wishing to progress. I will say it loud: Today the UAE is considered a world model for peaceful coexistence between followers of different religions and creeds. We think of tolerance in its wider sense and not just religious tolerance.

What we mean by tolerance is becoming used to respecting others and accepting plurality in cultures and nationalities. This, of course, requires that we develop our knowledge about the others and have meaningful and fruitful exchanges with them; it requires also that we do our best to reject conflict and promote the culture of peaceful coexistence.

**TAW:** What are the limits of tolerance that the new ministry seeks to achieve as a culture?

**Sheikh Nahyan:** Tolerance is not making concessions or



**Leading role.** UAE Minister for Tolerance Sheikh Nahyan bin Mubarak al-Nahyan (C) and Greek Orthodox Patriarch of Antioch John X (R) at the opening ceremony of Prophet Ilyas Cathedral in Abu Dhabi.

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striking reconciliations or appeasing anger. It is a culture and a behaviour. We look at it as a comprehensive human value aimed at giving everybody the full opportunity to live their lives without fear or coercion, to live happily and be able to contribute to society.

**TAW:** What are the prerogatives of the Ministry for Tolerance?

**Sheikh Nahyan:** The ministry is empowered to act locally and internationally. Locally, the ministry's tasks are decided in light of its mission to promote the spirit of mutual respect and peaceful coexistence between all inhabitants of the UAE. There are four areas that we focus on:

First, social awareness through programmes intended for all sections of the country's inhabitants such as children, students, men and women.

Second, creating social bonds that support tolerance and peaceful coexistence through clear plans for positive connections between all inhabitants and the ministries and businesses and with all nationalities living in the UAE. I want to insist that the Ministry for Tolerance is a ministry for all: citizens and foreigners, young people and old people, men and women, ministries and businesses, schools and universities and civil society institutions.

Third, organising activities and events all year long to put into practice the different aspects of tolerance. We need to create opportunities for all to come

together and work towards creating and spreading happiness, peace and harmony everywhere in the country.

Fourth, conducting research and studies and setting up indicators that will be helpful in following up on the various programmes.

**TAW:** What about the international level? We know that human experiences are interconnected and the ultimate objective is making tolerance a reality in the region and the world.

**Sheikh Nahyan:** Yes, I'm coming to the international level, which, of course, takes shape via cooperation with the state, institutions and very important individuals who support tolerance. The ministry will engage in cooperation programmes with other countries and with international organisations interested in spreading tolerance on the face of this planet.

This cooperation takes place in different ways like, for example, participating in international conferences in or outside the UAE, connecting with influential people in the domain of tolerance, in addition to reinforcing the role of the foreign communities living in the UAE in building fruitful international relations.

**TAW:** It is well known that education plays a crucial role in planting the seeds of tolerance or those of extremism in society. Does the ministry have a plan in this area, like including the subject of tolerance in school syllabi?

**Sheikh Nahyan:** I totally agree with you that formal education plays a crucial role in nurturing the values of tolerance and coexistence in society. School programmes must strive to equip students with the needed understanding and respect for different cultures, civilisations and religions. Schools must become effective tools to guard students against succumbing to the lure of violence, terrorism and anti-social behaviour. We want each member of our society to be able to seize the divine wisdom behind diversity among humans and to be able to take part in our collective life.

“Today the UAE is considered a world model for peaceful coexistence between followers of different religions and creeds.”

**TAW:** We heard that you have prepared a course called “Ethics Education.” How is it linked to spreading the culture of tolerance and is it a fundamental course?

**Sheikh Nahyan:** The educational syllabus in the UAE is quite aware of its role in this domain

and is doing an excellent job. Teaching ethics in UAE schools was an initiative by UAE Crown Prince Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed al-Nahyan. At the top of these ethics is respecting others. Including ethics in the syllabus translates the state's commitment to fostering excellent human values in UAE students.

**TAW:** The UAE today is playing leading roles in the fight against political Islam and its various offshoots. Did the UAE's stand come from experiencing attempts to spread extremism amidst the Emirati society and the foreign communities in the UAE?

**Sheikh Nahyan:** I must emphasise that the UAE's role in spreading tolerance and peaceful coexistence worldwide is a natural one and not the consequence of the UAE's fight against political Islam or whatever. It is the result of the country's belief in its capacities and the government's ability to achieve its goals. Tolerance in the UAE is not a reaction to events here and there, nor is it contingent on a passing political context or an unwanted sudden phenomenon.

**TAW:** What can the Ministry for Tolerance do in light of the existence of religious extremism and a religious culture which gave birth to terrorist groups?

**Sheikh Nahyan:** We consider spreading the values of religious tolerance and strengthening friendship and understanding bonds among followers of diverse religions as a major part of the ministry's mission. We will work with all parties inside and outside the UAE to spread knowledge about the various cultures and civilisations and to build successful tolerant communities everywhere and to open communication channels between Muslims and non-Muslims. We will do that by relying on exchanges, on diplomatic efforts between peoples and on the contributions of writers, intellectuals, universities and media locally and internationally.

**TAW:** By devoting a ministry to tolerance, what message does the UAE wish to convey to the world?

**Sheikh Nahyan:** The message we wish to convey to the world is that achieving tolerance is an ongoing effort given the nature of human communities. Furthermore, the domain of a culture of tolerance requires constant development and initiatives in tune with the changing conditions and ambitions. Our message to the world is that achieving tolerance is the responsibility of the entire society: families, clergy, business people, schools and universities, mass media and especially people working in the domains of culture and arts and all civil society institutions.

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