

Document #1408212

USDOS – US Department of State

2016 Report on International Religious Freedom - United Arab Emirates

Executive Summary

The constitution designates Islam as the official religion. It guarantees freedom of worship as long as it does not conflict with public policy or morals. It states all persons are equal before the law. The law prohibits blasphemy, proselytizing by non-Muslims, and conversion from Islam. An antidiscrimination law includes prohibitions on religious discrimination, but also criminalizes acts the government interprets as provoking religious hatred or insulting religions. The government prosecuted individuals suspected of belonging to or supporting organizations it designated as terrorist, including the Muslim Brotherhood. Human rights organizations stated that some of these individuals were nonviolent and had used social media to criticize government policies. The government prohibited the dissemination of literature it perceived as supporting extremism. The press reported three cases of non-Muslim residents deported for proselytizing. The General Authority of Islamic Affairs and Endowments (Awqaf) continued to provide guidance for the content of sermons in Sunni mosques. Individuals belonging to non-Islamic faiths said they could worship in private without government interference but faced restrictions on practicing their religion in public. Government-controlled internet service providers blocked access to websites critical of Islam or supportive of views the government considered extremist. The government established a new Ministry of Tolerance, whose core objectives include supporting religious tolerance and diversity. Christian churches and Hindu and Sikh temples serving the noncitizen population operated on land donated by the ruling families; during the year, the government granted additional lands to these groups. Noncitizen religious groups said capacity was still insufficient, however, to meet demand. Regulatory requirements sometimes limited the ability of religious organizations to rent space for worship and limited the ability to engage in certain charitable activities.

According to non-Muslim religious groups, there was a high degree of tolerance within society for minority religious beliefs and traditions, although societal attitudes and behavior discouraged conversion from Islam, but encouraged conversion to Islam. Anti-Semitic materials continued to be available for purchase at book fairs. There were continued instances of users posting anti-Semitic remarks on social media sites.

The U.S. Ambassador and embassy and consulate officers discussed with government officials the government's efforts to promote moderate Islam and support religious tolerance. Embassy and consulate officials also met with minority religious groups to

discuss their local experiences. The embassy and consulate general hosted events to engage with various religious communities and support interfaith contact building and dialogue in order to encourage and support religious openness and tolerance.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 5.9 million (July 2016 estimate), based on the results of the 2005 census. The UN estimates the total population is 9.3 million (July 2016 estimate). The most recent estimate from the country's National Bureau of Statistics (2010) is 8.3 million. There has been no nationwide population census since 2005.

Approximately 11 percent of the resident population are citizens, of whom more than 85 percent are Sunni Muslims, according to media reports. The vast majority of the remainder is Shia Muslims. Shia Muslims are concentrated in the emirate of Dubai.

Of the estimated 89 percent of residents who are noncitizens, the majority come from South and Southeast Asia. Although no official statistics are available for the breakdown between Sunni and Shia Muslims among noncitizen residents, media estimates suggest less than 20 percent of the noncitizen Muslim population is Shia.

Of the total population (both citizen and noncitizen), the 2005 census found 76 percent to be Muslim, 9 percent Christian, and 15 percent from other religious groups comprising mainly Hindus and Buddhists, but also including Parsis, Bahais, Druze, Sikhs, and Jews. Ahmadi Muslims, Ismaili Muslims, Dawoodi Bohra Muslims are included in this latter group and not counted as Muslims. Together these groups are comprised almost entirely of noncitizens and constitute less than 5 percent of the total population.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution designates Islam as the official religion. It guarantees freedom of religious worship “in accordance with established customs,” provided this “does not conflict with public policy or violate public morals.” The constitution states all citizens are equal before the law, and prohibits discrimination on grounds of religious belief.

The law prohibits black magic, sorcery, and incantations, which are punishable by a prison term ranging from six months to three years and deportation for noncitizens.

The law does not directly prohibit apostasy; however, the penal code defers to sharia on matters defined as crimes in Islamic doctrine, which in many interpretations prohibits apostasy.

The law prohibits blasphemy, defined as any act insulting God, religions, prophets, messengers, holy books, or houses of worship. Offenders are subject to imprisonment for five or more years and fines from 250,000 dirhams (AED) (\$68,100) to two million AED (\$545,000); noncitizens may be deported.

The law provides for imprisonment of up to five years for preaching against Islam or proselytizing to Muslims. The law also prohibits “abusing” a holy shrine or ritual of any religion, insulting any religion, inciting someone to commit sin or contravene national values, labeling someone an infidel or unbeliever, and forming groups or holding meetings with the purpose of provoking religious hatred. Offenders are subject to fines up to two million AED (\$545,000) and imprisonment generally ranging from five to 10 or more years.

The law does not require religious organizations to register; however, the formation of a legal entity, which requires some form of registration, is necessary for operational functions such as opening a bank account or renting space. Each emirate oversees registration of non-Muslim religious organizations and differs by emirate, organization, and circumstance. Currently, there is no consistent legal framework for registering non-Muslim religious organizations and, as a result, different religious organizations register under different federal ministries. The government has also granted some religious organizations land in free trade zones, where they legally registered by applying for a trade license, which allows these groups some operational functions.

The law requires Muslims and non-Muslims to refrain from eating, drinking, and smoking in public during fasting hours in the month of Ramadan.

The law prohibits churches from erecting bell towers or displaying crosses or other religious symbols on the outside of their premises, although they may place signs on their properties indicating they are churches.

Islamic studies are mandatory for all students in public schools and for Muslim students in private schools. The government does not provide instruction in any religion other than Islam in public schools. In private schools, non-Muslim students are not required to attend Islamic study classes. All students, however, are required to take national social studies classes, which include some teaching on Islam. A small number of Christian-affiliated schools are authorized to provide instruction tailored to the religious background of the student; for example, Islamic studies for Muslim students, and Christian instruction for Christian students, and ethics or comparative religions for others.

Private schools deemed to be teaching material offensive to Islam, defamatory of any religion, or contravening the country’s ethics and beliefs face potential penalties, including closure. All private schools, regardless of religious affiliation, must register with the government. Private schools are required to have a license from the federal

Ministry of Education and their curriculum must be consistent with a plan of operation submitted to and approved by the ministry. Administrative oversight of the schools is a responsibility of each emirate's government.

The law prohibits the distribution of religious literature the government determines is contradictory to Islam, as well as literature it deems blasphemous or offensive towards religions.

Land purchases and ownership are limited by law to citizens (or companies majority-owned by citizens), which means most minority religious communities (which consist of non-citizens) may not purchase property to build houses of worship.

The law prohibits multiple forms of discrimination, including religious discrimination, and criminalizes acts the government interprets as provoking religious hatred or insulting religion through any form of expression. It also criminalizes the broadcasting, publication, and transmission of such material by any means, including audio/visual or printed media, or via the internet, and prohibits conferences or meetings the government deems promote discrimination, discord, or hatred.

According to the constitution, sharia is the principal source of legislation, although the judicial system applies two types of law, depending on the case. Sharia forms the basis for judicial decisions in most family law matters, such as marriage, divorce, and inheritance for both Muslims and non-Muslims; however, in the case of non-citizens, the parties may petition the court to have the laws of their home country apply, rather than sharia. Sharia also applies in some criminal matters. Civil law provides the basis for decisions on all other matters. Shia Muslims in Dubai may pursue Shia family law cases through a special Shia council rather than through the regular judicial system. When sharia courts try non-Muslims for criminal offenses, judges have the discretion to impose civil or sharia penalties. Higher courts may overturn or modify sharia penalties.

Under the sharia judicial system Muslim men may marry non-Muslim women who are “people of the book,” meaning those who are either Christian or Jewish. Muslim women are not permitted to marry non-Muslim men. Non-Muslim men and Muslim women who marry are subject to arrest, trial, and imprisonment on grounds of engaging in extramarital sex, which carries a minimum sentence of one year in jail, as the marriage is considered invalid. In the event of a divorce between a Muslim father and non-Muslim mother, the law grants child custody to the Muslim father. Non-Muslim wives of citizens are also ineligible for naturalization. There is no automatic spousal inheritance provision under the law if the husband and wife are from different religions. Such spouses may not inherit their partner's property unless named as a beneficiary in that person's will. Non-citizens may register wills in the emirate in which they live. In the absence of a will filed with the government, the assets of foreigners who die are subject to sharia. In Dubai, for example, foreigners may file wills at the Dubai International Financial Center (DIFC) Court and include their own choice of law clause. Dubai wills not filed in the DIFC Court are subject to sharia.

The law prohibits activities the government deems supportive of political or extremist interpretations of Islam. These include the use of the internet or any other electronic means to promote views the government believes insult religions, promote sectarianism, damage national unity or the reputation of the state, or harm public order and public morals. Punishments include imprisonment and fines from 500,000 AED (\$136,000) to one million AED (\$272,000). The law prohibits membership in groups the government designates as terrorist organizations with penalties up to life imprisonment and capital punishment.

The law restricts charitable fundraising activities, including by religious organizations, by prohibiting the collection of donations or advertising fundraising campaigns without prior approval from authorities.

The country is not a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

Government Practices

The government prosecuted individuals suspected of belonging to or supporting organizations it designated as terrorist, including the Muslim Brotherhood. Human rights organizations stated that some of these individuals were nonviolent and had used social media to criticize government policies. Authorities deported three noncitizens for proselytizing. Awqaf continued to provide weekly guidance for the content of sermons in Sunni mosques, and the government monitored the issuance of all fatwas at both the national and emirate levels.

In Dubai, the Jaafari Affairs Council, which manages Shia affairs, including overseeing mosques and endowments, complied with the weekly guidance from Awqaf and issued additional instructions on sermons to Shia mosques. Individuals belonging to non-Muslim faiths continued to report they could generally worship in private without government interference but faced restrictions on practicing their religion in public. A number of non-Muslim groups used worship space on land donated by the ruling families, although most groups said capacity was insufficient to meet the demand created by the large expatriate population.

The government maintained a list of groups designated terrorist organizations, including the Muslim Brotherhood and organizations related to it, and prosecuted individuals it suspected of membership in or providing material support to these organizations. For example, in June, the Federal Supreme Court convicted 15 Yemeni residents and four UAE citizens of forming and collecting funds for a Muslim Brotherhood cell.

Human rights organizations stated that a number of individuals, whom the courts sentenced to prison terms for being members of banned Islamic groups, were nonviolent or were members of groups that had disavowed violence. The organizations

stated the government detained some individuals based on their social media support of certain groups or criticism of government policies rather than advocacy of violence. For example, one of the charges made by prosecutors against activist Nasser bin Ghaith was that he had incited citizens against their government when he used social media to criticize the government's decision to grant land for a Hindu temple.

According to news reports, in January local authorities arrested and deported three noncitizens accused of proselytizing, stating they were going door to door and “preaching a religion other than Islam,” in the emirate of Sharjah. The reports did not indicate the religion of the three accused.

According to media reports, the government continued to arrest individuals for the practice of sorcery in connection with financial fraud. In May authorities arrested an individual on suspicion of defrauding clients by claiming to be able to fix family, financial, or romantic problems through black magic, in return for money.

Within prisons, the authorities required Muslims to attend weekly Islamic services, and non-Muslims reported some pressure to attend ostensibly non-mandatory lectures and classes about Islam. Non-Muslims reported some pressure to attend ostensibly non-mandatory lectures and classes about Islam. In some of the emirates, Christian clergy were not able to visit Christian prisoners. News reports in September indicated that 97 prisoners in the northern emirate of Sharjah had converted to Islam during an “Islamic rehabilitation” program.

The country's two primary internet service providers, both majority owned by the government, continued to block certain web sites critical of Islam or supportive of religious views the government considered extremist, including Muslim sites. The service providers continued to block other sites on religion-related topics, including some with information on Judaism, Christianity, atheism, and testimonies of former Muslims who converted to Christianity.

The federal Awqaf continued to oversee the administration of Sunni mosques, except in Dubai. On its website, Awqaf stated its goals included instilling “moderation in Islam through religious guidance.” It continued to distribute weekly guidance to Sunni imams regarding subject matter, themes, and content of the weekly Friday Islamic sermons; published a Friday sermon script every week; and posted the guidance online on Awqaf's website. Awqaf applied a three-tier system in which junior imams followed the Awqaf Friday sermon script closely; midlevel imams prepared sermons according to the topic or subject matter selected by Awqaf authorities; and senior imams had the flexibility to choose their own subject and content for their Friday sermons. Some Shia sheikhs (religious leaders) chose to follow Awqaf-approved weekly addresses, while others wrote their own sermons.

Representatives of non-Islamic faiths said registration procedures and requirements for minority religious groups remained unclear. The government did not require non-Muslim religious groups to register, but according to some observers, the lack of a clear legal designation resulted in an ambiguous legal status for many groups and created difficulties in carrying out certain administrative functions, including banking or signing leases. For example, the government required religious groups to register as a precondition for establishing a formal place of worship, such as a temple, mosque, or church, or for holding religious services in rented spaces such as hotels or convention centers. The government permitted groups that chose not to register to practice in private homes, as long as this activity did not disturb neighbors through excessive noise or vehicle congestion. In one case, the government of Sharjah stopped a local religious congregation from practicing in a private home after a neighbor filed a complaint.

Awqaf continued to vet and appoint Sunni imams, except in Dubai, based on their educational background and knowledge of Islam, along with security checks. They did not however appoint sheikhs for Shia mosques. Dubai's Islamic Affairs and Charitable Activities Department (the emirate-level Awqaf) controlled the appointment of Sunni clergy and their conduct during worship in Dubai mosques. All of the imams in Dubai's 2000 Sunni mosques were government employees and included both citizens and noncitizens. Shia Muslims had their own council, the Jaafari Affairs Council, to manage Shia affairs, including overseeing mosques and community activities, managing financial affairs, and hiring preachers.

The government required all conference organizers, including religious groups, to register conferences and events, including disclosing speaker topics.

Immigration authorities continued to ask foreigners applying for residence permits to declare their religious affiliation on residence applications. School applications also asked for family religious affiliation. According to Ministry of Interior officials, the government collected this information for demographic statistical analysis only.

Individuals belonging to non-Islamic faiths, including Christianity, Hinduism, Sikhism, Buddhism, and Judaism, said they could worship and practice without government interference within designated compounds or buildings, or in private facilities or homes. The government, however, did not allow non-Muslims worship, preaching, or prayers in public.

The government continued to provide land for non-Islamic cemeteries. There were cremation facilities and associated cemeteries for the large Hindu community. The municipality also ran a cremation facility in Al Ain. Non-Muslim groups said capacity was sufficient to meet demand. The government required residents and nonresidents to obtain a permit to use cremation facilities, and authorities routinely granted such permits. The government allowed people from all religious groups except Islam to use the cremation facilities.

Some religious groups, particularly Christians and Hindus, advertised religious functions in the press or online, including holiday celebrations, memorial services, religious conventions, and choral concerts, without government objection. The government also allowed businesses to advertise, sell merchandise, and host events for non-Islamic religious holidays such as Christmas, Easter, and Diwali.

In spite of legal prohibitions on eating during daytime hours of Ramadan, in Dubai, non-Muslims were exempt from these laws in hotels and most malls; non-Muslims could eat at some stand-alone restaurants and most hotels in Abu Dhabi as well.

The government permitted Shia Muslims to observe Ashura in private, but not in public.

The government reportedly did not always enforce the law against bell towers and crosses on churches and some churches displayed crosses on their buildings.

Customs authorities continued to review the content of religious materials imported into the country, and sometimes prevented passengers carrying items deemed to be intended for sorcery from entering. Specific items airport inspectors reportedly confiscated included amulets, animal bones, and containers of blood.

Awqaf officials reviewed religious materials such as books and DVDs. The government continued to limit the publication and distribution of religious literature to what it considered moderate interpretations of Islam and placed restrictions on non-Islamic religious publications, such as material that could be considered proselytizing or promoting another religion over Islam. The government continued to prohibit the publication and distribution of literature it believed promoted extremist Islam and overtly political Islam, such as books by Muslim Brotherhood founding member Sayyid Qutb.

According to the federal Awqaf, the government continued to fund 95 percent of the approximately 5,000 Sunni mosques, and retained all Sunni imams as government employees. The government considered the remaining 5 percent of Sunni mosques to be private. Shia adherents worshiped in and maintained their own mosques. The government considered all Shia mosques to be private; however, they were eligible to receive some funds from the government upon request. The government continued to allow Shia mosques to broadcast the Shia version of the call to prayer from their minarets.

Noncitizens, which make up the membership of most minority religious groups, relied on grants and permission from local rulers to build houses of worship. For these groups, land titles remained in the respective ruler's name. There were approximately 40 Christian churches, in comparison to 24 churches 10 years ago, built on land donated by the ruling families of the emirates in which they were located, including houses of worship for the Catholic, Coptic Orthodox, Greek Orthodox, Anglican, and other denominations.

Two Hindu temples and one Sikh temple operated in Dubai. The government allocated land in Al-Wathba, Abu Dhabi for the construction of a Hindu temple, which media reports suggest will be completed by the end of 2017. There were no Buddhist temples; however, some Buddhist groups met in private facilities. There were no synagogues for the expatriate resident Jewish population, but regular communal worship took place on the Sabbath and holidays in a rented space in Dubai.

The government continued to grant permission to build houses of worship on a case-by-case basis, and additional churches opened during the year. Minority religious groups said, however, the construction of new houses of worship had not kept up with demand from the country's large noncitizen population. Many existing churches continued to face overcrowding and many congregations lacked their own space. Some smaller congregations met in private locations, or shared space with other churches in which rulers had given land. Noncitizen groups with land grants did not pay rent on the property. Several emirates also continued to provide free utilities for religious buildings.

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In Islamic court cases involving non-Muslim defendants, judges had the discretion to impose civil or sharia penalties, and consular sources said the judges generally imposed civil penalties.

On multiple occasions, government leaders issued public statements condemning what they considered extremist activities, arguing they represented an incorrect interpretation of Islam. For example in July following the terrorist attack at the airport in Istanbul, the government issued a statement condemning all forms of terrorism regardless of its sources and motives, and saying the act contradicted “all religious, human values and principles.”

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In February the government established a new federal Ministry of Tolerance to promote tolerance between religions, ethnic groups, and nationalities. The government stated the ministry was based on five pillars: strengthening the government’s role as an incubator of tolerance; consolidating the role of the family in nation building; promoting tolerance among young people and preventing them from adopting fanaticism and extremism; creating educational content that promotes tolerance; and serving as a leader of efforts to promote tolerance internationally. The ministry hosted a number of events highlighting religious diversity and tolerance, such as a public march in November consisting of several hundred participants from Muslim, Hindu, Sikh, and Christian, Bahai, Buddhist, and other religious backgrounds.

In June the minister of tolerance visited the Vatican and formally delivered an invitation from President Sheikh Khalifa bin Zayed Al Nahyan to Pope Francis to visit the country. In mid-September, Abu Dhabi Crown Prince Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahyan, accompanied by a high-level delegation that included multiple ministers, met with Pope Francis at the Vatican. During the visit, the crown prince publicly emphasized the importance of international cooperation to promote tolerance and cross-cultural communication.

Although the government permitted non-Muslim groups to raise money from their congregations and from abroad, some noncitizen religious groups were unable to open bank accounts because of the lack of a clear legal category to which to assign the organization. This reportedly created practical barriers to renting space, paying salaries, collecting funds, or purchasing insurance, and made it difficult to maintain financial controls and accountability.

Some Muslim and non-Muslim groups reported their ability to engage in nonreligious charitable activities, such as providing meals or social services, was limited because of government restrictions. For example, the government required groups to obtain permission prior to any fund raising activities. Religious groups reported official permission was required for any activities held outside of their place of worship, including charitable activities, and this permission was sometimes difficult to obtain.

In February the government hosted a World Interfaith Harmony Day in Dubai under the patronage of the Minister for Culture and Knowledge Development Sheikh Nahyan bin Mubarak Al Nahyan. The event brought more than 200 UAE-based and international leaders from faith groups, universities, businesses, NGOs, and public institutions to discuss the contributions of various faiths, with the stated goal of facilitating peace and harmony among people of all religious and philosophical traditions, while exploring ways to work together to strengthen homes and communities.

In December the government hosted a third annual conference in Abu Dhabi focusing on promoting peace in Muslim societies. The event brought together more than 400 Islamic scholars, intellectuals, researchers, and observers to discuss Islam and the challenges of promoting tolerance and peaceful coexistence within Muslim societies, with a focus on the role of the nation state in relation to Islamic tradition.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

According to non-Muslim groups, there was societal pressure discouraging conversion from Islam and encouraging conversion to Islam, including in the workplace. For example, some non-Muslim women reportedly faced pressure from family and friends to convert to Islam following marriage to a Muslim.

During Ramadan, local papers published stories portraying conversions to Islam positively and published statistics on conversions to Islam, such as the activities of the Dal Al Ber Society in helping convert 355 residents to Islam during Ramadan. Observers reported conversion from Islam was highly discouraged through strong cultural and social pressure, particularly from family members.

Holiday foods, decorations, posters, and books continued to be widely available during major Christian and Hindu holidays, and Christmas trees and elaborate decorations remained prominent features at malls and hotels. The news media continued to print reports of religious holiday celebrations, including religious activities such as Christmas celebrations and Hindu festivals such as Diwali. In addition, news reports highlighted the existence of pre-Islamic religious archeological sites in the country, such as a 7th century Christian monastery, which is clearly marked with tourism signage on Sir Bani Yas Island in Abu Dhabi emirate.

Religious literature, primarily related to Islam, was available in stores; however, bookstores generally did not carry core religious works for other faiths, such as the Bible or Hindu sacred texts.

Television stations frequently broadcast Islamic programming, including sermons and lectures; they did not feature similar content for other religions.

In some cases organizations reported hotels, citing government regulatory barriers, were unwilling to rent space for non-Muslim religious purposes, such as weekly church worship services.

Anti-Semitic materials were available for purchase at some book fairs. The 26th Abu Dhabi International Book Fair, an event organized by the government, included some private bookseller stalls containing anti-Semitic literature. There were continued reports of users posting anti-Semitic remarks on some social media sites, such as commentary alleging “Jewish” control over ISIS (also known as Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant).

According to religious groups, there was a high degree of acceptance and tolerance within society, including among both citizens and noncitizens, for diverse religious beliefs. News reports during the year quoted religious leaders, including from Catholic, Anglican, Hindu, Sikh, and other religious communities, positively portraying government support for their communities and the relative freedom in which they

could worship. News editorials and statements from national and religious leaders emphasized the importance of religious tolerance. For example, in February Vice President and Prime Minister of the UAE and Ruler of Dubai Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum wrote an editorial stating that the Middle East needs an “intellectual reconstruction that re-establishes the values of ideological openness, diversity, and acceptance of others’ viewpoints, whether intellectual, cultural, or religious.”

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. Ambassador and other embassy and consulate officers met with governmental officials and organizations, including the new Ministry of Tolerance, the Awqaf, Dubai’s Islamic Affairs and Charitable Activities Department, and the Supreme Council of Family Affairs. They discussed bilateral, international, and governmental efforts to counter violent religious extremism, promote moderate Islam, and support religious diversity, inclusiveness, and tolerance. Topics discussed also included the function of the Ministry of Tolerance, the implementation of new laws, and general regulatory and legal practices.

Embassy and consulate officers also met with representatives of different religious groups during the year to discuss the local experiences of these groups. The embassy and consulate general hosted events to bring together various leaders from religious communities to discuss the perspectives and concerns of their groups and individual members, and to encourage interfaith contact building and dialogue.

ecoi.net summary:

Annual report on religious freedom (covering 2016)



Country:

United Arab Emirates

Source:

[USDOS – US Department of State](#) ([/en/source/11558.html](#))

Original link:

<https://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/2016/nea/268918.htm> (<https://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/2016/nea/268918.htm>)

Document type:

Periodical Report

Language:

English

Published:

15 August 2017

Document ID:

1408212 (former ID [345241 \(/en/document/345241\)](#))

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ecoi.net is run by the Austrian Red Cross (department ACCORD) in cooperation with Informationsverbund Asyl & Migration. ecoi.net is funded by the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund, the Austrian Ministry of the Interior and Caritas Austria. ecoi.net is supported by ECRE & UNHCR.

