# The Jewish community in UAE comes into the daylight

The United Arab Emirates has shown increasing "tolerance" towards its Jewish residents, culminating with a historic agreement with Israel

**Nicolas Keraudren, Dubai, United Arab Emirates, *La Croix International*, 22 September 2020**



*Alex Peterfreund, co-founder of the Jewish community in the United Arab Emirates, prepares to read the Torah in Dubai on August 16. (Photo by JON GAMBRELL/AP)*

It was a poignant image.

A *shofar* (or ram's horn) is sounded in the Arab city of Dubai to mark the start of Rosh Hashana, the Jewish New Year. Yehuda Sarna, the non-resident Chief Rabbi of the United Arab Emirates, did the honors on September 18 atop a balcony of a residential building to open the Jewish High Holy Days.

A YouTube video which captured the shaded silhouette of Dubai's imposing skyscrapers provided clues as to where the video was shot. It came during an "historic" week for the Jewish community in the United Arab Emirates.

"We started praying in his villa every Saturday morning. And then we grew in number," said Alex Peterfreund, a Belgian national who came to Dubai in 20114. He and Ross Kriel, a South African Orthodox Jew whom he met shortly after arriving, co-founded the city's Jewish community. It now numbers "a few hundred people".

Peterfreund and Kriel have business cards stamped with the logo of the "Jewish Council of the United Arab Emirates". It is in the colors of the UAE flag and features a menorah, the seven-lamp candelabrum used in synagogues.

The community rents a "villa" -- the exact location of which is kept secret -- for the weekly Shabbat celebrations. It is also a place for "socializing" and gatherings "among Jewish expatriates", explained Thierry Braha, who described himself as a "not very religious" Jew living in the Emirates.

**The daily life of Jews "made easier"**

The recent agreement the UAE signed with Israel to normalize relations between Israel has further formalized the existence of the Jewish community on the Arabian Peninsula.
This is true even though the vast majority of its members do not have Israeli nationality.

Peterfreund confirmed that the agreement would be a boon for Jews in UAE. "We will have facilities that we did not have before," he predicted.

The Jewish Council of the Emirates, for example, plans to open a community center where there will be cultural activities. "Not only religious ones," he said. The daily life of Jews in the Emirates will also be "made easier".

"We've always had a bit of trouble getting kosher food, especially meat. Now it will be imported from Israel," Peterfreund explained. The first kosher-certified restaurant in Dubai opened its doors on September 17 inside the iconic Burj Khalifa, the world's tallest building and a major tourist attraction. And the Abu Dhabi authorities have encouraged hotels to "include kosher food options on the menus".

As soon as commercial air connections are established with Israel, tourists will be able to flock to this Gulf country. Direct telephone calls to Israel, as well as access to Israeli websites, have also been allowed since August 16.

**Signals of tolerance**

In all these aspects, the Jewish community in the UAE has indeed moved out of the shadows and into the daylight. The UAE authorities had already sent signals of openness in 2019, a year dedicated to practicing "tolerance".

Pope Francis became the first pope ever to visit the Arab Peninsular that year when he went to Abu Dhabi and the government established a ministry dedicated to tolerance.

The authorities have also announced the construction of the "Abrahamic Family House". This interfaith complex on the island of Saadiyat in Abu Dhabi will include a mosque, a church and a synagogue. It is to be completed by 2022.
Members of the Jewish community now hope to strengthen these ties between the two cultures.

"Israelis are very direct people. The Emirati people take more time," said Peterfreund.

"The local Jewish community must play an intermediary role to facilitate cross-cultural exchange," he added.