

# Alcohol legalization in United Arab Emirates': Between local norms and global tolerance

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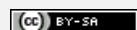
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## ABSTRACT

*This article departs from the phenomenon of tolerance by the United Arab Emirates towards global citizens who live through the policy of legalizing alcohol, which was previously an act that was criminalized by the government which was heavily influenced by Islamic values. This observation uses a qualitative method with a descriptive model that takes information from several previous literature as well as articles and reports in the media that directly discuss related phenomena. This research uses the concept of national interests as a thinking approach in finding answers regarding the strong reasons for the United Arab Emirates to implement tolerance through this policy. The results of the observations provide an answer that the reason the United Arab Emirates issued a policy of legalizing alcohol freely was as a form of real execution of the country which wants to build a new image as a world tolerant country that accepts the differences of its immigrant citizens, especially culturally living with alcohol which is seen as very contrary to local norms. This policy is of course influenced by the main factor of the United Arab Emirates as a tourist country which has a very large migrant population that exceeds its own local population. By using a national interest approach, of course there is a goal that makes the country implement this policy, which is none other than tourism purposes. Certainly this research will be an informant regarding the unique things implemented by the United Arab Emirates.*

### Keywords:

*United Arab Emirates; tolerance; legalization; alcohol; global*

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## INTRODUCTION

The United Arab Emirates (UAE), a country on the Arabian Peninsula with a majority Muslim population, has values and social norms that are strongly influenced by Islamic teachings. As a country that upholds religious traditions, Islamic principles have historically been the basis for the formation of laws and social rules. However, as a country that has developed into an international tourist destination, the UAE is also home to a very large global population. Non-local residents, both tourists and expatriate workers, even

outnumber native residents. In 2022, the UAE will be recorded as the country with the highest level of immigrant and migrant population in the world (Firmansyah, 2022).

The existence of this diverse global community has influenced the UAE's social and legal policies, including regarding alcohol consumption. Initially, alcohol consumption was very strictly regulated under Islamic law. However, in order to adapt to the needs of a heterogeneous global population, the UAE undertook major reforms to its alcohol-related laws. In 2020, the UAE government introduced drastic changes to the federal Criminal Code (KUHP) through Article 313 number 15, which legalizes the consumption, possession and trade of alcohol in certain situations.

The new rules remove criminal threats for individuals who consume or trade alcohol in legalized spaces. Additionally, each emirate is permitted to implement additional regulations regarding the use, distribution and trade of alcohol. However, special provisions remain in place, for example penalties for those who offer alcohol to children under the age of 21, with the threat of imprisonment and fines ranging from 100 to 500 dirhams, unless it can be proven that the individual is of legal age through official documents.

This move marks a significant change compared to the previous rules stipulated in Article 313 of the 1987 federal Criminal Code, which was amended in 2006. In the old rules, alcohol was only permitted for non-Muslims within certain limits, with violations of these rules carrying severe penalties in the form of detention, a minimum of six months or a minimum fine of 10,000 dirhams. For offenses related to the production or trade of alcohol, the penalties are even more severe, namely detention of a minimum of two years or a fine of at least 50,000 dirhams.

This change raises a fundamental question: why did the UAE choose to tolerate alcohol consumption and legalize it, even though it goes against the values of the majority religion? These policy reforms can be seen as part of the UAE's efforts to navigate the dynamics of cultural diversity amidst its large global population. In addition, these changes reflect the UAE's pragmatic approach in supporting the national economy through tourism and creating an image as an inclusive and tolerant country. The legalization of alcohol not only aims to meet the needs of the international community but also shows the UAE's commitment to building social harmony amidst cultural and religious diversity. These reforms reflect the UAE's flexibility in balancing traditional values with the demands of modernity, while strengthening its position as a global center that upholds tolerance and diversity.

Several previous studies have highlighted the principles of tolerance which have begun to be used as one of the foundations of the state by the United Arab Emirates. The United Arab Emirates started its *rebranding* its national identity in a direction that is quite tolerant of things that apply in other religious environments but still adapts to the signs that apply in Islam as the basis of government. This is an effort to support the internal and external policies of the United Arab Emirates based on current national interests, especially economic interests (Alim et al., 2023). However, this research focuses on substantive answers related to state interests, while the author wants to focus on more specific answers, namely the reasons for legalizing alcohol which are supported by the principle of tolerance.

Furthermore, Baycar also saw almost the same thing based on the results of his observations. For Baycar, the United Arab Emirates actually uses the presence of its large number of non-national citizens, including migrants, expatriates and tourists, as an opportunity to build its new national identity by labeling it with the principle of national tolerance towards diversity and multiculturalism. This is not without consideration, for the United Arab Emirates this can make non-national citizens from their respective backgrounds feel considered and given a place. Apart from that, this is certainly an adaptation effort to fulfill the country's national interests (Baycar, 2023). This can be a reference for the author

in observing the alcohol legalization policy as a result of the principle of tolerance that has been established.

The following research also supports the two studies above with its findings regarding the normalization of relations between the United Arab Emirates and Israel. This finding can be claimed as a form of application of the principle of national tolerance which is starting to be echoed by the United Arab Emirates as explained above. In his findings, Tahmi assessed that the normalization of relations between the two parties was based on national interest motives, especially on the part of the United Arab Emirates itself, which has four interests, including: political interests, security interests, economic interests and peace interests. With a diplomatic attitude like this, it shows a change in the foreign policy attitude of the United Arab Emirates, especially with its position as a country in the Arabian Peninsula which is certainly seen as having a big responsibility for Palestinian independence from Israel's grasp (Tahmi et al., 2022). At least this shows the implementation of an attitude of tolerance in terms of normalization with Israel, but the author wants to focus on the alcohol legalization policy.

The latest research also provides support for the thesis with its findings which assess the efforts of the United Arab Emirates to re-image *nation branding* its more adaptive approach is based on the moderate Islamic pattern which is quite influential in contemporary times. With this attitude, the United Arab Emirates is indirectly starting to shift away from *nation branding* which is a special characteristic of Arab countries as before (Kourgiotis, 2020). This is sufficient reference to see the implications directly through existing policies such as the legalization of alcohol based on and observing the reasons for implementing these policies.

To answer this question the author uses the views of Dr. Donald E. Nuechterlein and Dr. James N. Rosenau about national interests with the priorities and levels required according to existing interests. For Rosenau, assessing how important national interests are in the discourse of a country can be seen from its basic objectives, which include four, namely: homeland defense, economic needs, a world order that produces and the promotion of existing values. So Rosenau made these four basic parts to see whether national interests are important or not based on existing needs, both at the lower middle level scale and at the upper middle level (Tahmi et al., 2022). So this is very in line with the national interests pursued by the United Arab Emirates in tolerating its global population through its alcohol legalization policy which is nothing but a form of validation of its new national values by using the principle of tolerance for diversity, especially for quite a lot of immigrants with various identity backgrounds such as stated by previous researchers (Alim et al., 2023). Apart from that, what is no less important is economic interests as stated by previous researchers (Tahmi et al., 2022).

From the view above, if we summarize it into one argument, we can conclude at a glance or temporarily that by tolerating the global community with diverse backgrounds through the legalization of alcoholic drinks is to fulfill several national interests related to certain matters, especially in economic terms. Apart from that, this policy can also be claimed as a form of providing a place for global communities with various backgrounds to carry out their respective habits which may conflict with local norms of the United Arab Emirates which are strongly influenced by values based on Islamic religious teachings, such as consuming alcoholic drinks legalized.

## METHOD

This research uses qualitative methods with a descriptive approach to observe changes in alcohol legalization policies in the United Arab Emirates. The data collection comes from

books, scientific journals and several previous studies, official websites or official reports which directly explain the related data and online media or digital newspapers which report various facts related to the research (Fadli, 2008). Then, in the data analysis process, the author collects the facts in the scientific literature one by one and then uses them to support the existing findings. Then as a whole it will be put together and used as the latest findings for the author. Here the author will look for various previous research, books, reports and news articles contained in online media (websites and the like) which provide information that is closely related to the phenomenon that the author is observing. The various information obtained will be collected and used to become facts and data to support the author's findings.

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

### **The United Arab Emirates legalized alcohol to meet the needs of its large global expatriate population, both for tourism and work**

The United Arab Emirates is a country that has a position as a country with a fairly large tourism industry in the world, which means it receives many global citizens who come from various parts of the world, especially the western part, namely the European region, which is the largest number of visitors after residents of the Gulf countries with the largest tourist destination. Based on existing observations, there were around 27 million to 29 million tourists living in the period 2012 - 2013 who came to the city of Dubai (E. Zaidan & Kovacs, 2017). It looks fantastic with such a large number even though this figure is only limited to the state of Dubai, this is considering that Dubai is one of two states in the United Arab Emirates (Dubai and Abu Dhabi) which are the largest and most prominent compared to other states in terms of tourism and other businesses such as commerce, banking, etc (Khaeruddin & Hidayat, 2020). However, from the fact that the number of visitors to the state of Dubai can be used as a sample to see how many tourists come to the United Arab Emirates as a whole. This is still limited to the number of tourists from Europe, not tourists from other countries. In addition, existing reports show that the United Arab Emirates occupies the position of the tenth largest tourist industry in the world with a number of visitors of around 11.48 million, income of around 34.44 billion USD and 6.8% of GDP in that year (World Data, 2021). Even though the years are different, this is quite supportive of the sample above which shows that the United Arab Emirates as a large tourist country has quite a lot of global tourist visitors.

Regarding the origin of these tourists, as stated above, the second largest number of visitors after the Gulf area are visitors from the European region (E. Zaidan & Kovacs, 2017). It should be noted that the European region is the environment with the most active level of alcohol consumption in the world, followed by the American region based on reports *World Health Organization (WHO)* or the World Health Organization in 2019 (WHO, 2024). WHO reports that the European country that is seen as having the highest alcohol activity in 2019 is the Czech country and is also seen as the top ten country in the world in terms of alcohol consumption activity with an average of around 14.26 liters of alcohol consumed annually. Only then was it followed by 13.19 liters of Latvia, 12.85 liters of Moldova, 12.79 liters of Germany, 12.78 liters of Lithuania, 12.75 liters of Ireland, 12.67 liters of Spain, 12.48 liters of Uganda, 12.46 liters Bulgarian, 12.45 liters Luxembourg (Salsabilla, 2024). This figure really shows how high the consumption of alcoholic beverages is on the European continent. Bearing in mind that most of the countries mentioned are countries located in mainland Europe. This is quite an indication in strengthening this perception of the European region. Apart from Europe, previously in the field of shopping and entertainment tourism, America was also detected contributing to global tourists reaching 13.5% (E. A. Zaidan, 2016). This

can also be a reference in looking at the factors driving tolerance implemented by the United Arab Emirates through this legalization policy. Because considering that the American region is also recorded as the highest consumer after the European region (WHO, 2024). So with this data, it can be used as reinforcement in seeing the reasons for the United Arab Emirates to legalize alcoholic drinks. It is very natural that the United Arab Emirates, as a country where Islam is the religion of the majority of the local community and whose social norms are in line with Islamic values, legalizes the consumption of alcohol. This is a form of tolerance or providing space for global tourists from Europe and America, considering that based on these figures, alcohol consumption has become part of the cultural life of European and American citizens.

Then not only do they come for tourism purposes, there are also global citizens in the United Arab Emirates who come for work purposes. Based on Human Rights Watch records, migrant workers in the United Arab Emirates make up 95 percent of the total workforce in the United Arab Emirates with a total of around 2.7 million migrant workers. As for the migrant workers, after being observed, it turned out that most of them came from the South Asian region, especially India, followed by Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal and Sri Lanka (Maura & Putri, 2019). This figure shows how many global people come to the United Arab Emirates apart from traveling, namely with the aim of looking for decent work. This is because the United Arab Emirates is considered a large industrial country which has quite varied and numerous job opportunities, thus encouraging citizens from several developing countries, especially India and surrounding areas, who do not have jobs to migrate to the United Arab Emirates to look for decent work. In fact, it is not surprising that the number of global workers exceeds the number of local residents of the United Emirates itself as shown in the table below.

According to Anam & Permata (2022), if we want to compare the number of global and local citizens in the last four years, data on global citizen arrivals based on their country of origin in 2024 can be used as a reference. This data provides a clear picture of the demographic structure in the United Arab Emirates (UAE).

The UAE is known as one of the countries with a very large number of expatriates, making it a multicultural center in the world. Based on data, the total population of the UAE reaches **12.50 million people**, with the majority coming from abroad. This condition reflects the UAE's dependence on foreign workers to support various economic sectors.

The expatriate or global population dominates the UAE's demographic structure, reaching **11.06 million people** or **88,50%** of the total population. India ranks first with **4.75 million people** (37.96%), followed by Pakistan with **2.09 million people** (16.72%), Bangladesh as much **0.92 million people** (7.38%), and the Philippines with **0.86 million people** (6.89%). Apart from that, countries such as Iran, Egypt, Nepal, Sri Lanka, China, and several others also contribute to the number of expatriates in the UAE. The role of expatriates in the UAE is very significant, especially in the construction, service, hospitality, and technology and business sectors, which are the backbone of the country's economy.

In contrast, the UAE's local indigenous population is only a handful **1.44 million people**, or approx **11,50%** of the total population. This data shows that local citizens are a minority in their own country, while the majority of economic and social activities depend on the global population. With a total population reaching **12.50 million people**, the UAE is a clear example of a country that relies heavily on foreign labor to support growth and development. The predominance of the expatriate population creates a unique dynamic, making the UAE one of the fastest growing multicultural centers in the world (Christian et al., 2024).

From the data above, we can see for ourselves the condition of the global population of workers, which is actually much larger than the local population of the United Arab Emirates itself. With evidence of this capacity, we can also use it as a reference to further strengthen the evidence of how many global citizens live in the United Arab Emirates who bring various cultures or habits of life, even if they are contrary to local norms (such as the culture of alcohol consumption) which is the norm. which is applied in this country with its position as a country that applies criminal law based on strong Islamic law to its citizens (Madhani et al., 2024). So this can also be a reinforcement in seeing the reasons for the United Arab Emirates to tolerate global citizens through the legalization of alcohol in Local Law which applies as a form of providing a place for global citizens who want to carry out their life habits such as consuming alcohol without having to abandon their belief in the Islamic religion. itself as the religion of the majority of the local people of the United Arab Emirates (Martín-Cabello, 2014).

### **Want to make tolerance a new national principle**

As previously mentioned, the United Arab Emirates is campaigning for the principle of tolerance as its new national principle and has become one of the foundations of its national policy (Alim et al., 2023). It is not surprising that the United Arab Emirates formed a special Ministry that handles tolerance affairs since 2016. The aim of institutionalizing tolerance affairs that has been adopted by the federal cabinet council is none other than to become *influencer* a world that echoes an attitude of mutual respect between diversity that will be united by a pattern of coexistence for the sake of creating absolute peace. Therefore, to convince the world of the principle of national tolerance that has been adopted, the United Arab Emirates held an international peace declaration which was approved and signed directly by two great figures of different religions, namely Pope Francis and Al-Azhar Imam Ahmed Al-Tayeb in Abu Dhabi. The contents of the declaration generally echo an attitude of mutual respect for diversity and the doctrine of feeling the same as one family between one party and another in the world (UAE Ministry of Tolerance & Coexistence, 2016). The fact of the institutionalization of the principle of tolerance can be considered as the aftermath of the United Arab Emirates' desire to give the country a new label as a country of tolerance which is then followed by opening the door for actions that are considered contrary to previous local norms to be changed into actions that are well accepted by the United Arab Emirates as is the case. Alcohol consumption activities. This is because previously the criminal law in the United Arab Emirates itself used two laws, namely conventional criminal law and Islamic sharia criminal law which strictly prohibited alcohol consumption activities which were then freely amended in 2020 (Pelton, 2018).

Apart from forming a special ministry that handles matters of tolerance and coexistence, in building its new image as a world tolerant country, the United Arab Emirates has inserted the principles of tolerance into the existing learning curriculum in the school education environment in the United Arab Emirates. In this case, the doctrine of tolerance is placed as one of the focuses of learning achievement in the Islamic education curriculum in high schools in the United Arab Emirates. The focus of tolerance learning is indoctrinated based on appropriate critical views of Islam. This aims to instill values and a spirit of tolerance in children and the people of the United Arab Emirates (Alhashmi et al., 2020). Apart from that, remembering that the United Arab Emirates is home to around 81% of migrants and almost hundreds of countries who bring different ethnicities, religions and even cultures and living habits (Thiollet, 2011). Apart from inserting the doctrine of an Islamic-based perspective of tolerance into the education curriculum, the United Arab Emirates also executed a decision that was no less controversial in building a new image of

tolerance, namely by normalizing its diplomatic relations towards Israel (Alfiyaturrohmamiyyah, 2021). How can it not be surprising given the position of the United Arab Emirates as a fellow Arab country that shares the same conditions in Palestine which is being colonized by Israel? However, this is enough to illustrate the strong efforts of the United Arab Emirates to promote its tolerance towards the world as a national interest. This is very independent of its foreign policy interests as a fellow Arabian peninsula country in the issue of Palestine (Wicaksono, 2020). So, in general, the legalization of alcohol consumption can be said to be proof of part of the real implementation and execution of the United Arab Emirates in realizing tolerance as its new national principle through several applications of tolerance. Then of course this implementation can also be seen as strengthening the reasons for the United Arab Emirates to issue an alcohol exemption policy.

### **To accelerate the recovery of the Tourism sector after being hit by the Pandemic**

During the corona virus outbreak, the whole world experienced the same impact, especially the economic crisis due to restrictions on mobilization. The United Arab Emirates itself is no exception, which is experiencing this impact, especially in the tourism industry itself, which is experiencing a decline in profits. We can compare this to the number of tourists in 2019, which was the peak number of tourists during the United Arab Emirates tourism industry, namely 25.28 million, which greatly exceeds the number of local people themselves. However, when we entered the pandemic period, in 2020, the number of tourists dropped quite drastically to 8.08 million. This is a very large difference in figures, as a result of the economic crisis during the COVID-19 pandemic outbreak. Likewise, the Emirates' income in the tourism sector amounted to 38.41 billion dollars in 2019, but entering 2020 the tourism sector's income decreased to 24.62 billion dollars alone. This is also a quite large difference like the number of visitors (World Data, 2021). So the author sees that the legalization of free alcohol is a way for the United Arab Emirates to restore its tourism sector in the hope of stimulating global tourists to come back to the United Arab Emirates, especially tourists who are very attached to the culture of alcohol consumption in their lives, such as tourists from the region. Europe. This is related to the report above regarding Europe being the worst consumer of alcohol (WHO, 2024) and the largest contributor of tourists after the Gulf countries (E. Zaidan & Kovacs, 2017). Not only that, the changes to the law regarding alcohol consumption regulations also coincided with the decline in tourism in the country, namely in 2020 or the time of the corona virus outbreak. This fact is enough evidence to see why the United Arab Emirates is increasingly tolerant of its global citizens through easing alcohol consumption regulations. So it is not surprising that this method has produced results with quite effective progress in the recovery of tourism, namely by increasing the number of tourist visits, which is greater than the number during the Covid-19 period in the following years. The number of visits will reach 20.83 million people in 2022, 24.07 million people in 2023, and 27.32 million people in 2024 (J. Degenhard, 2024).

### **CONCLUSION**

The United Arab Emirates has tolerated its global community through the legalization of alcoholic drinks on the social life of global communities from various opposing identities who live in the United Arab Emirates. By implementing tolerance through the legalization of alcohol in the United Arab Emirates, it shows that there is a goal of national interest which is none other than tourism needs. Apart from that, there are strong reasons that encourage the implementation of this policy, including: (1) because it accommodates a large number of global citizens from among workers and tourists who bring different living cultures, especially in terms of alcohol consumption brought by tourists from Europe and America.

(2) wanting to make tolerance a new national principle which will be used as one of the foundations of national policy. Therefore, the alcohol legalization policy is a real form of execution of the ambition to build a new image of the United Arab Emirates as a world tolerant country (3) to accelerate the recovery of the tourism sector which has plummeted due to the crisis during the Corona virus pandemic. This will stimulate global tourists from Europe and America to come back to visit the United Arab Emirates without fear of local regulations that apply in bringing the habit of consuming alcohol. This of course has a significant impact on the recovery of tourist arrivals in the United Arab Emirates in the year after Covid-19. This will certainly be a big challenge for the United Arab Emirates in maintaining Islamic values which influence the social norms of the local community. The implementation of this policy will certainly have an impact on local communities who will also directly experience the enactment of these contradictory regulations which will certainly lead to negative impacts of their own which will be a challenge for the state government to adjust. However, the state remains the highest authority in deciding and implementing national policies even if they are deemed to be contrary to local norms. However, this policy is essentially in the national interest which is also in the name of the interests of the people themselves, namely as an effort to improve the quality of life and restore the national economy. Therefore, this will depend on the way the state wins the hearts of its people by validating the real implications so that the policy continues to be implemented.

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