



U.S. Department of State
Annual Report on International Religious Freedom for 1999:
Algeria

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ALGERIA

Section I. Freedom of Religion

The Constitution declares Islam to be the state religion but prohibits discrimination based on religious belief, and the Government generally respects this right in practice. Islam is the only legal religion, and the law limits the practice of other faiths; however, the Government follows a de facto policy of tolerance by not inquiring into the religious practices of individuals.

The vast majority of citizens belong to the Sunni branch of Islam. There are no official data available on the number of non-Muslim residents. Many citizens who practice non-Muslim faiths have fled the country as a result of the civil war. Thus, the number of Christians and Jews in the country is significantly lower today than the estimated total before 1992. The small Christian community, which is predominantly Roman Catholic, has approximately 25,000 members, and the Jewish community numbers perhaps fewer than 100.

For security reasons, both Christians and Jews have concentrated in Algiers and the larger cities of Constantine and Oran. There is also a Christian community in the eastern region of Kabylie. The small Christian and Jewish populations practice their faiths without government interference.

The law prohibits public assembly for purposes of practicing a faith other than Islam. However, there are Roman Catholic churches, including a cathedral in Algiers, which is the seat of the Archbishop, that conduct services without government interference. In 1994 the size of the Jewish community diminished significantly, and its synagogue has since been abandoned. There are only a few smaller churches and other places of worship; non-Muslims usually congregate in private homes for religious services.

Because Islam is the state religion, the country's education system is structured to benefit Muslims. Education is free to all citizens below the age of 16, and the study of Islam is a strict requirement in the public schools, which are regulated by the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Religious Affairs. Private primary and secondary schools are not permitted to operate.

The Government appoints preachers to mosques and gives general guidance on sermons. The Government monitors activities in mosques for possible security-related offenses. The Ministry of Religious Affairs provides some financial support to mosques and has limited control over the training of imams.

Conversions from Islam to other religions are rare. Because of safety concerns and potential legal and social problems, Muslim converts practice their new faith clandestinely. The Shari'a-based Family Code prohibits Muslim women from marrying non-Muslims, although this regulation is not always enforced. The code does not restrict Muslim men from marrying non-Muslim women.

Non-Islamic proselytizing is illegal, and the Government restricts the importation of non-Islamic literature for widespread distribution. Personal copies of the major works of other religions, such as the Bible, may be brought into the country. Occasionally, such works are sold in local bookstores in Algiers. However, many vendors refuse to sell these works due to fear of reprisal by Islamic extremists, and, to a lesser extent, because of government policy. The Government also prohibits the dissemination of any literature that portrays violence as a legitimate precept of Islam.

Under both Shari'a (Islamic law) and Algerian law, children born to a Muslim father are Muslim, regardless of the mother's religion. Islam does not allow conversion to other faiths at any age.

There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom during the period covered by this report.

During the period covered by this report, an indeterminate number of persons were serving prison sentences because of their alleged Islamist sympathies or membership in Islamist groups; however, there were no reports of cases in which it was clear that persons were arrested or detained based solely on their religious beliefs.

There were no reports of the forced religious conversion of minor U.S. citizens who had been abducted or illegally removed from the United States, or of the Government's refusal to allow such citizens to be returned to the United States.

The country's 7-year civil conflict has pitted radical Muslims against moderate Muslims. Almost 77,000 civilians, terrorists, and security forces have been killed during the past 7 years. Extremist Islamists have issued public threats against all "infidels" in the country, both foreigners and citizens, and have killed both Muslims and non-Muslims, including missionaries. During the period covered by this report, Islamic extremists continued attacks against both the regime and moderate Muslim and secular civilians. The majority of the country's terrorist groups do not, as a rule, differentiate between religious and political killings. In the majority of cases during the period covered by this report, in which both security forces and civilians died at the hands of terrorists, the preferred methods of assault were knifings (particularly throat-slitting), and shootings.

Section II. Societal Attitudes

The majority of cases of harassment and security threats against non-Muslims come from radical Islamists who are determined to rid the country of those who do not share their extremist interpretation of Islam (see Section I). However, a majority of the population subscribes to Islamic precepts of tolerance in religious beliefs. Through joint communiques, moderate Islamist religious and political leaders have criticized publicly acts of violence committed in the name of Islam.

In general, noncitizens who practice faiths other than Islam enjoy a high level of tolerance within society. However, citizens who renounce Islam generally are ostracized by their families and shunned by their neighbors, and expose themselves to the risk of attack by radical extremists. The Government generally does not become involved in these kinds of internal family disputes.

Section III. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. Embassy maintains frequent contact with the National Observatory for Human Rights (ONDH), a quasigovernmental institution that was established by the Government in response to international and domestic pressure to improve Algeria's human rights record. The Embassy assists wherever possible to augment the ONDH's ability to address human rights abuses.

Because Algiers was rated as a "critical threat" post during the period covered by this report, the U.S. Embassy's staff level was one-third the size that it would have been under normal circumstances. Officers were confined to the Embassy grounds and moved outside its walls, for business purposes only, with armed escorts. For practical and logistical purposes, the Embassy could not maintain regular contact with leaders in the Muslim community or with the Ministry of Religious Affairs. Nevertheless, the Embassy tracked human rights issues, including religious freedom, as closely as possible under these restrictive working conditions.

The Embassy maintains close contact with religious leaders in the non-Muslim community, who cite the dangers posed by radical Islamists as their principal concern regarding the safe practice of their faith.

In July 1998, the Embassy provided support for the visit of U.S. Congressman Frank Wolf, who met with local religious leaders, including the Roman Catholic Archbishop and a Protestant missionary who has lived in Algeria for more than 30 years.

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