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Jordan

International Religious Freedom Report 2004

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The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, provided that religious practices are consistent with "public order and morality"; however, the Government continued to impose some restrictions on freedom of religion during the period covered by this report. According to the Constitution, Islam is the state religion.

There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom during the period covered by this report. Members of unrecognized religious groups and religious converts from Islam face legal discrimination and bureaucratic difficulties in personal status cases. The Government prohibits non-Muslims from proselytizing Muslims.

The generally amicable relationship among religions in society contributed to religious freedom. Relations between Muslims and Christians in the country generally are amicable; however, adherents of unrecognized religions face some societal discrimination.

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom issues with the Government in the context of its overall policy to promote human rights and interfaith dialogue and understanding.

Section I. Religious Demography

The country has a total area of 55,436 square miles, and its population is approximately 5.4 million. More than 95 percent of the population is Sunni Muslim. Official government figures estimate that Christians make up 4 percent of the population; however, government and Christian officials privately estimate the true figure to be closer to 3 percent. There also are at least 20,000 Druze, a small number of Shi'a Muslims, and fewer than 800 adherents of the Baha'i faith. There are no statistics available regarding the number of atheists or persons who are not adherents of any religious faith.

Officially recognized Christian denominations include the Greek Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Greek Catholic (Melkite), Armenian Orthodox, Maronite Catholic, Assyrian, Anglican, Lutheran, Seventh-day Adventist, United Pentecostal, and Presbyterian churches. Other churches, including the Baptist Church, the Free Evangelical Church, the Church of the Nazarene, the Assembly of God, and the Christian Missionary Alliance, are registered with the Ministry of Justice as "societies" but not as churches. Some Egyptian immigrants are adherents of the Coptic Church. There also are a number of Chaldean and Syriac Christians and Muslim Shi'a represented in the immigrant Iraqi population.

With few exceptions, there are no major geographic concentrations of particular religious groups. The cities of Husn, in the north, and Fuheis, near Amman, are predominantly Christian. Madaba and Karak, both south of Amman, have significant Christian populations. The northern part of the city of Azraq has a significant Druze population, as does Umm Al-Jamal in the governorate of Mafraq. There also are Druze populations in Amman and Zarka and a smaller number of Druze in Irbid and Aqaba. There are a number of nonindigenous Shi'a living in the Jordan Valley and the south.

Foreign missionaries operating in the country include the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), Jehovah's Witnesses, Campus Crusaders for Christ, Life Agape, Intervarsity, Navigators, Christar, Arab World Ministries, Operation Mobilization, Southern Baptist International Mission Board, the Conservative Baptist, Frontiers, Brother Andrew, the Jesuits,

Christian Brothers, Rosary Sisters, Benedictines, Anglican Church Mission Society, the Society of Friends (Quakers), Comboni Sisters, Little Sisters of Jesus, the Religious of Nazareth, Sisters of St. Dorothy, the Daughters of Mary the Helper (Salesian Sisters), the Little Sisters of Nazareth, the Little Family of the Annunciation, Sisters of St. Joseph of the Apparition, Basiliennes Chouerites, Focolare Sisters, Franciscans (OFM), Sons of Divine Providence (Don Orione Fathers), Association Fraternal International (AFI), Institute of the Incarnate Word, Franciscans of the Cross, Dominican Sisters of St. Catherine, Franciscan Missionaries of Mary (FMM), Franciscan Missionaries of the Immaculate Heart of Mary, Daughters of Mary of the Enclosed Garden, Theresian Institute, and the Missionaries of Charity.

Section II. Status of Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, provided that religious practices are consistent with "public order and morality"; however, the Government continued to impose some restrictions on freedom of religion during the period covered by this report. According to the Constitution, Islam is the state religion.

While Christianity is recognized as a religion, and non-Muslim citizens may profess and practice the Christian faith, churches must be accorded legal recognition through administrative procedures to own land and perform marriages and other sacraments. The Prime Minister unofficially confers with an interfaith council of bishops representing officially registered local churches on all matters relating to the Christian community, including the registration of new churches in the country. The Government uses the following criteria when considering official recognition of Christian churches: the faith does not contradict the nature of the Constitution, public ethics, customs, or traditions; the faith is recognized by the Middle East Council of Churches; the faith does not oppose the national religion; and the group includes some citizen followers.

The role of the State in religious affairs is limited to supervision. Groups that have practices that violate the law and the nature of society are prohibited; however, in practice there were no reports that religious groups were banned.

Churches and other religious institutions that wish to receive official government recognition, must apply to the Prime Ministry for registration. Recognized non-Muslim religious institutions do not receive subsidies; they are financially and administratively independent from the Government and are tax-exempt. Some churches were registered with the Ministry of Interior as "societies" rather than churches.

Religious instruction is mandatory for all Muslim students in public schools. Christian and Baha'i students are not required to attend courses in Islam, and Christian students are allowed religious instruction in public schools. In the past, a local Orthodox priest complained that public schools did not provide a satisfactory curriculum for Christian students in lieu of Islamic studies. In 1996 the late King Hussein and the Ministry of Education approved religious instruction for Christian students in public schools. In 1998 the Government launched an experimental program in four districts to incorporate Christian education in the public school curriculum. The Constitution provides that congregations have the right to establish schools for the education of their own members "provided that they comply with the general provision of the law and are subject to government control in matters relating to their curriculums and orientation."

There are two major government-sponsored institutions that promote interfaith understanding: the Royal Institute for Interfaith Studies and the Royal Academy for Islamic Civilization Research (al-Bayt Foundation). Both institutions sponsor research, international conferences, and discussions on a wide range of religious, social, and historical questions from the perspective of both Muslims and Christians. The Government held an international Christian conference in government facilities in 2001.

The Muslim feasts of Eid al-Adha, Eid al-Fitr, the Prophet Mohammed's Birthday, the Prophet's Ascension, and the Islamic New Year are celebrated as national holidays. Christmas and the Gregorian calendar New Year also are national holidays. Easter is a government holiday and Christians may request leave for other Christian feasts prescribed by the local Council of Bishops.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

There were no reports that the practice of any faith was prohibited; however, the Government does not officially recognize all religious groups. Some religious groups, while allowed to meet and practice their faith, complained of societal and official discrimination. In addition not all Christian denominations have applied for or been accorded legal recognition as religions.

The Government does not recognize the Druze or Baha'i faiths as religions but does not prohibit the practice of these faiths. The Druze face official discrimination but do not complain of social discrimination. Baha'is face both official and social discrimination. The Government does not record the bearer's religion as Druze or Baha'i on national identity cards issued to adherents of these faiths; Druze are listed as Muslim, and Baha'i do not have any religion officially listed. The small Druze and Baha'i communities do not have their own courts to adjudicate personal status and family matters; such matters are heard in Shari'a courts. The Government does not officially recognize the Druze temple in Azraq, and four social halls belonging to the Druze are registered as "societies." The Government does not permit Baha'is to register schools or places of worship.

The Government does not recognize Jehovah's Witnesses, the Church of Christ, or the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, but each denomination is allowed to conduct religious services and activities without interference.

The Government does not interfere with public worship by the country's Christian minority. Although the majority of Christians are allowed to practice freely, some activities are prohibited, such as encouraging Muslims to convert to Christianity, considered legally incompatible with Islam.

Shari'a law prohibits non-Muslims from proselytizing Muslims. Conversion to the Muslim faith by Christians is allowed; however, a Muslim may not convert to another religion. The small number of Muslims who convert to other faiths claim societal and government discrimination. The Government does not fully recognize the legality of such conversions. Under Shari'a, converts are regarded as apostates and legally may be denied their property and other rights; however, in practice this principle is not applied. The Government claims it neither encourages nor prohibits apostasy. Converts from Islam do not fall under the jurisdiction of their new religion's laws in matters of personal status and are considered Muslims under Shari'a. Converts to Islam remain under the jurisdiction of the Shari'a courts. Shari'a law prescribes the death penalty for Muslims who convert to another religion; however, there is no corresponding statute under national law, and such punishment never has been applied.

The Government generally does not prohibit citizens from proselytizing if their activities are within the limits of the law, maintain the proselytizers' personal security and safety, and do not contradict local standards. Government policy requires specifically that foreign missionary groups (which the Government believes are not familiar with the customs and traditions of the indigenous society) refrain from public proselytizing to maintain the missionaries' safety and security from members of society opposed to such practices. In the past, the Government has taken action against some Christian proselytizers in response to the complaints of recognized Christian groups who charged that the missionaries' activities disrupted the peace and cohesion of society.

During the period covered by the previous report, members of the local evangelical community reported increased attention from the Government. In 2002, a foreign pastor and his wife claimed that a border official at the airport threatened to cancel their residency permits. The pastor claimed that the action was in response to his refusal to verify whether or not Muslims attend his church's services. He and his wife left the country voluntarily and have not returned. Also in 2002, two members of the evangelical community complained that lower level government officials threatened to cancel their residency permits for activities that allegedly were inappropriate. When the Government became aware of this at higher levels, it dropped the matter. The two evangelicals remained in the country and have reported no subsequent problems.

Noncitizen Christian missionaries operate in the country but are subject to restrictions. During the period covered by this report, Christian mission groups in the country complained of difficulty in dealing with local interchurch politics. In addition, some also complained of delays in obtaining residence permits.

Despite previous difficulties with its legal status, the Jordan Evangelical Theological Seminary (JETS), a Christian training school for pastors and missionaries, was registered with the Government and operating as a cultural center. Students and faculty from the U.S. and elsewhere wishing to attend JETS were able to obtain residency in the country through tourist visas. The Government authorized JETS to own property, and in August they broke ground on a new facility.

Of the 110 seats in the Lower House of Parliament, 9 are reserved for Christians. No seats are reserved for Druze or adherents of other religious faiths. In 2001, the King dissolved Parliament and charged the Government with drafting a new election law. The country's parliamentary election law historically has limited the number of Islamists elected to Parliament. The Islamic Action Front, the country's major Islamic party, participated in the June 2003 parliamentary elections, winning 18 of the 110 seats.

The Political Parties Law prohibits houses of worship from being used for political activity. The law was designed primarily to deny government opponents the ability to preach politically oriented sermons in mosques.

In early 2000, radical Islamists criticized a poem published by Muslim poet Musa Hawamdeh, and the Government banned the book in which the poem was published. In July 2000, Hawamdeh, without retracting any portion of his poem, was acquitted on all charges in both the Shari'a and civil courts. Because of technicalities, the Shari'a court subpoenaed Hawamdeh again in 2001 for the case in which he had already been acquitted. In May 2003, Hawamdeh was sentenced to 3 months in prison for apostasy. The Court of First Instance found that Hawamdeh had denied "undeniable facts from the Holy Koran." Hawamdeh immediately challenged the verdict, and in August 2003 the Appeals Court upheld the verdict. At the end of the period covered by this report, he remained free pending another appeal.

The Ministry of Religious Affairs and Trusts manages Islamic institutions and the construction of mosques. It also appoints imams, provides mosque staff salaries, manages Islamic clergy training centers, and subsidizes certain activities sponsored by mosques. The Government loosely monitors sermons at mosques and requires that speakers refrain from criticizing the royal family or instigating social or political unrest.

In January 2003, the private weekly newspaper Al Hilal was shut down and three of its journalists were arrested and accused of "harming the dignity of Muslims" (blasphemy) by publishing an article about the Prophet Muhammad's sexual relationship with his wives, described in some legends. In February 2003 all three were found guilty, with the prison sentences of two journalists commuted to fines and the author sentenced to 6 months' incarceration. The newspaper has since resumed publication.

According to the Constitution, religious community trusts ("Awqaf") and matters of personal status such as marriage, divorce, child custody, and inheritance fall within the exclusive jurisdiction of the Shari'a courts for Muslims and separate non-Muslim tribunals for each religious community recognized by the Government. There is no provision for civil marriage or divorce. The head of the department that manages Shari'a court affairs (a cabinet-level position) appoints Shari'a judges, while each recognized non-Muslim religious community selects the structure and members of its own tribunal. All judicial nominations are approved by the Prime Minister and commissioned officially by royal decree. The Protestant denominations registered as "societies" come under the jurisdiction of one of the recognized Protestant church tribunals. There are no tribunals assigned for atheists or adherents of unrecognized religions. Such individuals must request one of the recognized courts to hear their personal status cases.

Shari'a is applied in all matters relating to family law involving Muslims or the children of a Muslim father, and all citizens, including non-Muslims, are subject to Islamic legal provisions regarding inheritance.

All minor children of a male citizen who converts to Islam automatically are considered to be Muslim. Adult children of a male Christian who has converted to Islam become ineligible to inherit from their father if they do not convert to Islam. In cases in which a Muslim converts to Christianity, the conversion is not recognized legally by the authorities, and the individual continues to be treated as a Muslim in matters of family and property law. The minor children of a male Muslim who converts to Christianity continue to be treated as Muslims under the law.

In 1998, legal custody of two children of a Christian widow living in Irbid was granted, against her will, to her Muslim brother. A civil court held that Shari'a law revoked the mother's custody of the children because she had failed to raise them as Muslims. The children had been raised as Christians because both their mother and father originally were Christian. Their father allegedly converted to Islam shortly before his death. As a result of this alleged conversion, the children were considered to be Muslim as a matter of Shari'a law; however, the mother lawfully remained Christian. The civil court rejected the mother's final appeal in February 2002. The court's final judgment had yet to be enforced by the end of the period covered by this report, and the children continued to live with their mother and attend a local school.

Some Christians are unable to divorce under the legal system because they are subject to their faith's religious court system, which does not allow divorce. Many such individuals convert to another Christian denomination or the Muslim faith to divorce legally.

The Government notes individuals' religions (except for Druze, Baha'is, and other unrecognized religions) on the national identity card and "family book" (a national registration record that is issued to the head of every family and that serves as proof of citizenship) of all citizens. Atheists must associate themselves with a recognized religion for official identification purposes.

The Government traditionally reserves some positions in the upper levels of the military for Christians; however, all senior command positions traditionally have been reserved for Muslims. Division-level commanders and above are required to lead Islamic prayer for certain occasions. There is no Christian clergy in the military.

During the Muslim holy month of Ramadan, all citizens, including non-Muslims, are discouraged from eating, drinking, or smoking in public or in vehicles, and they also are discouraged strongly from dressing in a manner that is considered inconsistent with Islamic standards. Restaurants are closed during daylight hours unless specifically exempted by the Government. Only those facilities catering specifically to tourists are allowed to remain open during the daytime and sell alcohol during the month of Ramadan.

Under Shari'a as applied in the country, a female heir receives half the amount of a male heir's inheritance, and non-Muslim widows of Muslim spouses have no inheritance rights. A sole female heir receives half of her parents' estate; the balance goes to designated male relatives. A sole male heir inherits both of his parents' property. Male Muslim heirs have the duty to provide for all family members who need assistance. Men are able to divorce their spouses more easily than women are, although a provisional law passed in 2001 allows women to divorce their husbands in Shari'a court. Since the law went into effect, Shari'a courts have granted several hundred divorces brought by women. The new lower house of Parliament rejected the law in August 2003, but the upper house approved it. It remains in effect until parliament takes final action.

According to government legal officials, civil, criminal, and commercial courts accord equal weight to the testimony of men and women. However, in Shari'a court, the testimony of two women is equal to that of a man's in most circumstances.

Abuses of Religious Freedom

There were no reports of religious detainees or prisoners who remained in custody at the end of the period covered by this report; however, in 2001 the security services detained approximately 50 persons, described in the press as Islamists. Such detentions were related to allegations of involvement in terrorist or strictly political activities rather than religious affiliation or belief.

Forced Religious Conversion

There were no reports of forced religious conversion, including of minor U.S. citizens who had been abducted or illegally removed from the United States, or of the refusal to allow such citizens to be returned to the United States. However, according to the law, the father of a child may restrict the child's travel. There are at least 10 U.S. citizen children of mixed-religion marriages residing in the country against the will of their U.S. citizen mothers. Under the law, such children are considered Muslim if their fathers are Muslim.

Abuses by Terrorist Organizations

There were no reported abuses targeted at specific religions by terrorist organizations during the period covered by this report.

Section III. Societal Attitudes

Relations between Muslims and Christians in the country generally are amicable. Relations within the Christian community sometimes are difficult, especially within the evangelical Christian community. There are disputes between and within different Christian denominations.

In general Christians do not suffer discrimination. Christians hold high-level government and private sector positions and are represented in the media and academia approximately in proportion to their presence in the general population. Senior command positions in the military traditionally have been reserved for Muslims (see Section II). Baha'is face some societal and official discrimination. Employment applications occasionally contain questions about an applicant's religion.

The majority of the indigenous population views religion as central to one's personal identity, and religious conversions are not tolerated widely. Muslims who convert to other religions often face social ostracism, threats, and abuse from their families and Muslim religious leaders. Such relationships, which ultimately may lead to conversion (either to the Muslim or Christian faiths), usually are strongly discouraged by the families. Interfaith relationships may lead to ostracism and, in some cases, violence against the couple or feuds between members of the couple's families. When such situations arise, families may approach local government officials for resolution. There were reports that in some cases local government officials encouraged Christian women involved in relationships with Muslim men to convert to Islam to defuse potential family or tribal problems; however, during the period covered by this report, there were no known cases in which local officials harassed or coerced persons to convert from Christianity to Islam. In the past, there were some cases of mixed-faith married couples seeking to emigrate to other countries because of the negative family and societal reactions to their marriages.

In the fall of 2003, a number of Muslims and Christians founded the Jordan Interfaith Coexistence Research Center, which has been increasingly active in promoting interfaith dialogue both domestically and internationally. During the period covered by this report, local newspapers occasionally published articles critical of evangelical organizations.

In 2002, a member of the royal family (Prince Hassan) hosted in Amman an international, interfaith conference on "Rejecting Violence and Promoting Peace with Justice." The conference focused on interfaith dialogue among the religious communities of Iraq, but it included religious leaders and scholars from numerous countries.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom issues with the Government in the context of its overall policy to promote human rights. U.S. Embassy officials raised religious freedom and other human rights issues with government authorities on a number of occasions. Embassy officers met frequently with members of the various religious and missionary communities in the country, as well as with private religious organizations. An Embassy officer was in regular contact with members of the U.S. missionary community in the country.

During the period covered by this report, the Embassy sent 12 Shari'a law students to the U.S. on an International Visitor program in which they met with Christian and Jewish opinion leaders. Several Shari'a law students were also studying English at the Embassy's American Learning Center. The Embassy organized a Voluntary Visitor program in the U.S. for four members of a local interfaith coexistence group. The visit focused on religious tolerance and interfaith dialogue, initiating ongoing contacts with numerous American religious groups. In the past, Embassy officers assisted private religious groups to obtain official registration.

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