

Jordan (30)

**2000 Annual Report on International Religious Freedom: Jordan**

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JORDAN

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, provided that religious practices are consistent with "public order and morality;" however, the Government imposes some restrictions on freedom of religion, and citizens may not always be allowed to practice the religion of their choice. 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.

Relations between Muslims and Christians in the country generally are amicable. Bahai's face some societal and official discrimination.

U.S. Embassy officials discussed religious freedom issues with government authorities on a number of occasions.

Section I. Government Policies on Freedom of Religion**Legal/Policy Framework**

The Constitution provides for the safeguarding of "all forms of worship and religious rites in accordance with the customs observed in the Kingdom, unless such is inconsistent with public order or morality;" however, the Government imposes some restrictions on freedom of religion. Citizens may not always be allowed to practice the religion of their choice. According to the Constitution, Islam is the state religion.

Islamic institutions are managed by the Ministry of Religious Affairs and Trusts, which appoints imams and subsidizes certain activities sponsored by mosques. Religious institutions, such as churches that wish to receive official government recognition, must apply to the Prime Ministry for registration. The Protestant denominations registered as "societies" come under the jurisdiction of one of the recognized Protestant churches for purposes of family law, such as divorce and child custody. The Government does not recognize a number of religions.

Religious Demography

Over 90 percent of the population are 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 2 percent. Neither Islam nor the Government recognizes religious faiths other than the three main

monotheistic religions: Islam, Christianity, and Judaism. In addition, not all Christian denominations have been accorded official government recognition. Officially recognized 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. There are also small numbers of Shi'a and Druze, as well as adherents of the Baha'i Faith. There are no statistics available on citizens who do not adhere to any particular religious faith.

With few exceptions, there are no major geographic concentrations of particular religious groups. The city of Husn, in the north, is mostly Christian, and Fubeis, near Amman, is also predominantly Christian. Madaba and Karak, both south of Amman, have significant Christian populations. Governmental Restrictions on Religious Freedom

The Government does not interfere with public worship by the country's Christian minority. However, although the majority of Christians are allowed to practice freely, some activities, such as proselytizing or encouraging conversion to the Christian faith--both considered legally incompatible with Islam--are prohibited. Christians are subject to aspects of Shari'a (Islamic law) that designate how inheritances are distributed.

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 recognize the Baha'i Faith as a religion but does not prohibit the practice of the faith. However, Baha'is face both official and societal discrimination. The Government does not record the bearer's religion on national identity cards issued to Baha'is, nor does it register property belonging to the Baha'i community. Baha'is are not permitted to establish schools, places of worship, or cemeteries. Adherents of the Baha'i Faith are considered as Muslims for purposes of family and inheritance law. Unlike Christian denominations, the Baha'i community does not have its own court to adjudicate personal status and family matters. Baha'i personal status matters are heard in Shari'a courts.

Non-Jordanian Christian missionaries operate in the country but are subject to restrictions. Christian missionaries may not proselytize Muslims. In late 1999 and early 2000, U.S.-affiliated Christian mission groups in the country complained of increased bureaucratic difficulties, including refusal by the Government to renew residence permits.

The Jordan Evangelical Theological Seminary (JETS), a Christian training school for pastors and missionaries, applied in August 1998 for a permit to purchase land on which to construct a seminary and campus.

In April 1999, permission was granted to purchase the land on the condition that the JETS register and receive accreditation from the Ministry of Education. Pending such registration, authorities suspended renewal of the residence permits of all of the seminary's 36 foreign students (who come from 10 foreign countries), and 2 members of the faculty. In 1998 and early 1999, some noncitizen Arab Muslim students were deported or asked to leave the country as a result of their association with the JETS. For several months in late 1999, the Ministry of Interior relented and issued visas and residence permits to the students and staff of the JETS. However, in December 1999, the Ministry again began refusing to issue or to renew visas or resident permits for students and staff of the school until it received registration from the Ministry of Education. To date, the school has not been registered and the Ministry's refusal to issue visas has affected 14 of 140 students and 4 staff members at the school.

In April and September 1999, an employee of a small language school in Amman applied for a residence permit from the Ministry of Interior. His application was denied on both occasions, reportedly because government officials believed that he had been trying to convert Muslims to Christianity. He reapplied in April 2000 and is awaiting a response from the Government.

In September 1999, the authorities threatened to revoke the license of a businessman who conducts radio listener surveys and follows up with those respondents who report an interest in Christianity.

In January 2000, General Intelligence Directorate (GID) officials contacted an official of Life Agape--an organization associated with the Baptist Church, which distributes Bibles and conducts Bible studies--and asked him to sign a letter stating that he would not "deal with Muslims." The official was told that if he did not sign the letter his office would be closed. In February 2000, police brought the letter to the Life Agape office, escorted the official to the police station, and then brought him to meet with the governor of the Amman municipality. The following day, the governor closed the Life Agape office; no reason for the closure was specified on the governor's order.

The Government notes individuals' religions (except for Bahais) on the national identity card and "family book" (a national registration record issued to the head of every family that serves as proof of citizenship) of all citizens.

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 be subject to the control of government in matters relating to their curricula and orientation."

In December 1999, the municipality of Amman closed the Roy and Dora Whimman Academy -- a small, nonprofit school founded by U.S.-affiliated missionaries in Amman to provide affordable English-language education for foreign student -- on the basis that it was not

registered with the Ministry of Education. The board of the academy had been in the process of registering the school since 1997 and had been led to believe that registration would be forthcoming in the spring of 2000. After being contacted by embassies representing a number of countries, the Ministry of Education assisted the school in properly fulfilling registration requirements. In April 2000, the school was officially registered and once again began teaching students.

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.

In February 2000, criticism of a poem entitled "Yusef," which was included in a book of poems published in May 1999 by Muslim poet Musa Hawamdeh, began to circulate in mosques in Amman. Radical Islamists escalated the criticism of the poem and the poet, calling for the poet to be killed if he refused to recant the poem and for him to be divorced forcibly from his Muslim wife. Criticism of the poem from the Ministers of Religious Affairs and Information followed, and by the end of March 2000 the Government banned the book in which the offending poem was published. In June 2000, Hawamdeh was summoned to a Shari'a court to face allegations of apostasy; he was charged by the head of court clerks with denying Koranic facts and defaming a prophet. The complainant requested that Hawamdeh publicly retract the controversial statements in his poem and requested that the Shari'a judge order that he divorce his wife and lose his rights to inherit property or manage his own wealth. The Shari'a court referred the case to a civil court, which had not ruled on the case as of June 30, 2000. Apostasy is not punishable under the civil code; however, other charges, such as blasphemy, could be filed in civil court. In July 2000, Hawamdeh, without retracting any portion of his poem, was acquitted on all charges in both the Shari'a and criminal courts.

According to local press reports, a second book of poetry by Ziyad al-Anani was banned in April 2000; the book contained a poem that reportedly was offensive to Islam. The authorities did not bring charges against al-Anani and the book was published and distributed in Lebanon instead.

In June 2000, due to a dispute stemming from an intrachurch rivalry between the Jerusalem Patriarchate and the Antioch Orthodox Patriarchate, the Government closed an Arab Orthodox church in Amman that was aligned with the Antioch Patriarch in Damascus, Syria. The Government closed the church following a request from the local Orthodox hierarchy to enforce a 1958 law that grants the Jerusalem Patriarchate authority over all Orthodox churches in the country (also see Section II). The 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. Muslims who convert to other faiths complain of social 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, this

principle is not applied in practice. Converts from Islam do not fall under the jurisdiction of their new religion's laws in matters of personal status and still are considered Muslims under Shari'a, although the reverse is not true. Shari'a prescribes a punishment of death for conversion; however, there is no equivalent statute under national law.

The Political Parties Law prohibits houses of worship from being used for political party activity. The law was designed primarily to prevent Islamist parliamentarians from preaching in mosques.

Two major government-sponsored institutions have been established to 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.

All minor children of a male citizen who converts to Islam are automatically 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 themselves convert to Islam. In cases where a Muslim converts to Christianity, the act is not legally recognized by the authorities, and the subject continues to be treated as a Muslim in matters of family and property law. Moreover, the minor children of a male Muslim who converts to Christianity continue to be treated as Muslims under the law.

Religious instruction is mandatory for all Muslim students in public schools. Christian and Baha'i students are not required to attend courses in Islam.

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 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 and alcohol is not served except in those facilities catering specifically to tourists.

The security services detained approximately 100 persons, described in the press as "Islamists," during the period covered by this report. These detentions appear related to allegations of involvement in terrorist or strictly political activities rather than religious affiliation or belief.

The country's parliamentary election law--which grants disproportionate representation to rural and tribal districts--was enacted to limit the number of Islamists elected to Parliament. Many Islamists boycotted the 1997 parliamentary elections and have stated that in order for them to participate in the next parliamentary elections, the election law must be amended.

There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom

during the period covered by this report.

Forced Religious Conversion of Minor U.S. Citizens

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. However, according to Jordanian law the father of a child may restrict the child's travel. There reportedly are at least 35 cases of U.S. citizen children residing in Jordan against the will of their U.S. mothers, and perhaps many more. Under the law, these children automatically are considered Muslim because their fathers are Muslim.

Section II. Societal Attitudes

Relations between Muslims and Christians in the country are generally amicable. Relations within the Christian community sometimes are difficult, especially in regard to the evangelical Christian community. In September 1999, several evangelical organizations received anonymous facsimile transmissions that purported to be copies of a letter from a group of older, more established churches to the Prime Minister. The letter called for the Government to limit the rights of what it called "nonestablished" churches, referring to the country's small but cohesive evangelical community. In June 2000, due to a dispute stemming from an intrachurch rivalry between the Jerusalem Patriarchate and the Antioch Orthodox Patriarchate, the Government closed an Arab Orthodox church in Amman, which was aligned with the Antioch Patriarch in Damascus, Syria. The Government closed the church following a request from the local Orthodox hierarchy to enforce a 1958 law that grants the Jerusalem Patriarchate authority over all Orthodox churches in the country (also see Section I).

In general Christians do not suffer discrimination. Christians hold government positions and are represented in the media and academia approximately in proportion to their presence in the general population. Baha'is face some societal and official discrimination. Their faith is not recognized officially, and Baha'is are classified as Muslims on official documents, such as the national identity card (see Section I). Christian and Baha'i children in public schools are not required to participate in Islamic religious instruction.

Muslims who convert to other religions often face social ostracism, threats, and abuse from their families and Muslim religious leaders.

Employment applications occasionally contain questions about an applicant's religion.

In March 2000, Jordan University amended the student council election law, granting the university president the authority to appoint half of the university's 80-member student council, including the chair. This decision reportedly was made in order to curb the influence of Islamists on campus. In April 2000, many students--Islamists and non-Islamists--

protested this decision. Islamist groups also called for a boycott of the elections on April 25, 2000 and some persons associated with these groups physically attempted to prevent students from voting.

During the period covered by this report, several newspaper articles were published that were critical of evangelical organizations.

Section III. U.S. Government Policy

U.S. Embassy officials have raised religious freedom and other human rights issues with government authorities on a number of occasions. The Embassy's human rights officer has met frequently with members of the various religious and missionary communities in the country, as well as with private religious organizations. The Embassy's American Citizens' Services officer is in regular contact with members of the American missionary community in the country, many of whom serve as emergency wardens. In addition, the Ambassador was in contact with senior government officials throughout January, February, March, and April 2000. In February 2000, Congressman Charles Canady of Florida forwarded a letter signed by 63 members of Congress to King Abdullah, encouraging the Government to grant the JETS' request for registration with the Ministry of Education.

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