



2014 Report on International Religious Freedom - Morocco

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Executive Summary

The constitution stipulates that Morocco is a sovereign Muslim state and Islam is the religion of the state. It prohibits political parties, parliamentarians, and constitutional amendments from attempting to infringe upon Islam. The constitution guarantees the freedom of thought and practice of one's religious affairs. The criminal code prohibits efforts by non-Muslims to proselytize, and the government discouraged conversion from Islam. The Ministry of Endowments and Islamic Affairs (MEIA) controls the content of preaching in mosques, religious education, and broadcast religious material. The government allows foreign Christian communities to attend worship services in approved places, although Christian citizens generally do not attend these services. There are no known Shia mosques or Bahai houses of worship. The government continued to restrict the distribution of non-Islamic religious materials, as well as some Islamic materials that it deemed inconsistent with the Maliki-Ashari school of Sunni Islam. The government monitored the activities of religious groups and placed restrictions on individuals and groups when it deemed their actions exceeded the bounds of acceptable religious or political activity.

There were reports of anti-Semitism, although most Jews live in safety throughout the country. Christian citizens reported official harassment and pressure to convert from non-Christian family and friends. Most members of the Shia and Bahai communities avoided disclosing their religious affiliation.

The Ambassador, embassy and consulate general officers, and other U.S. government officials discussed religious freedom with the government within the context of official visits and on other occasions. The bilateral strategic dialogue promoted religious tolerance. The Assistant Secretary of State for Educational and Cultural Affairs led a working group focusing on interfaith dialogue and youth. The U.S. government sponsored programs focused on religious tolerance and dialogue.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the population at 33 million (July 2014 estimate). More than 99 percent is Sunni Muslim. Groups together constituting less than 1 percent of the population include Christians, Jews, Shia Muslims, and Bahais. According to Jewish community leaders, there are an estimated 3,000 to 4,000 Jews, approximately 2,500 of whom reside in Casablanca. The Rabat and Marrakech Jewish communities each have approximately 100 members.

The predominantly Roman Catholic and Protestant foreign resident Christian community consists of approximately 5,000 members, although some clergy estimate the number to be as high as 25,000. Most foreign resident Christians live in the Casablanca, Tangier, and Rabat urban areas. The Protestant community includes the French Protestant community (Evangelical Church of Morocco (EEM, its French acronym)); the Moroccan Association of Protestant Churches (AMEP, its French acronym), a network of autonomous, generally English-speaking foreign resident communities; and Anglican churches in Casablanca and Tangier. There is a Russian Orthodox church in Rabat and a Greek Orthodox church in Casablanca. Various local Christian leaders estimate that there are 4,000 to 8,000 citizen Christians (mostly ethnic Amazigh) who attend "house" churches and live predominantly in the south.

There are an estimated 3,000 to 8,000 Shia Muslims, most of them foreign residents from Lebanon, Syria, or Iraq, but including a small number of citizens. There are 350-400 Bahais in urban areas, particularly in Tangier. There are no known Shia mosques or Bahai houses of worship.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution stipulates that Morocco is a sovereign Muslim state and Islam is the religion of the state. It prohibits political parties, parliamentarians, or constitutional amendments from attempting to infringe upon Islam. The constitution guarantees the freedom of thought and practice of one's religious affairs. The constitution stipulates that the king hold the Islamic title of Commander of the Faithful, protector of Islam, and the guarantor of freedom of worship in the country. According to the constitution, only the High Council of Ulema, a group headed and appointed by the king with representatives from all regions of the country, may issue scholarly fatwas (formal religious opinions), which become binding only through endorsement by the king in a royal decree.

The criminal code prohibits attempts by non-Muslims to "shake the faith" of Moroccans from the Maliki-Ashari school of Islam, which the government has interpreted to mean attempting to convert Muslims to other religions. Restricted activities include the distribution of non-Islamic religious materials. By law, impeding or preventing one or more persons from worshipping or from attending worship services of any religion may be punished by six months to three years of imprisonment and a fine of 115 to 575 dirhams (\$13 to \$64). The law applies the same penalty to "anyone who employs enticements to undermine the faith of a Muslim or to convert him to another religion." It also provides the right to a court trial for anyone accused of such an offense. Voluntary conversion is not a crime under the criminal or civil codes.

The law permits the government to expel summarily any non-citizen resident it determines to be "a threat to public order," even where other laws require due process first. The government has cited this law to expel or refuse entry to foreign Christians accused or suspected of proselytizing.

The law requires non-Maliki-Ashari Muslim and non-Jewish religious groups to register before they are able to undertake financial transactions or conduct other business as private associations and legal entities. The registration requirements for religious organizations are the same as all other associations. Registered churches and associations include the Roman Catholic, Russian Orthodox, Greek Orthodox, French Protestant, and Anglican Churches. These churches existed before independence in 1956 and operate within an officially recognized organization, the Council of Christian Churches of Morocco (CECM by its French acronym). The government recognizes foreign resident Protestant churches that do not fall under the CECM but formed under the auspices of AMEP. The government currently does not recognize Bahai or Shia as registered religious organizations.

There is a separate set of laws and courts with authority over personal status matters for Jews, covering issues such as marriage, inheritance, and other family matters. Rabbinical authorities, who are also court officials, administer Jewish family courts. Muslim judges trained in the country's interpretation of sharia administer the courts for personal status matters for all other religious groups. Christians, however, inherit according to civil law. There are no legal mechanisms recognizing the Christian community (or other non-Muslims) in the same way the state recognizes the Jewish community. Non-Muslims must formally convert to Islam and be a permanent resident before they can become guardians of abandoned or orphaned children. According to the law, a Muslim man may marry a non-Muslim woman, but a Muslim woman may not marry a non-Muslim man unless he converts to Islam.

The constitution and the law governing the media sector prohibit any citizen, including members of parliament normally immune from arrest, from criticizing Islam. Such expressions are punishable by imprisonment. The High Authority for Audiovisual Communications requires all eight television stations to dedicate 5 percent of their airtime to religious content. All public channels are required to broadcast the Islamic call to prayer five times daily.

The penal code states that any person known to be Muslim who breaks the fast in public during the month of Ramadan without an exception granted by religious authorities is liable for punishment of six months in prison and a fine of 200 to 500 dirhams (\$22 to \$55).

The constitution prohibits political parties founded on religious, ethnic, linguistic, or regional bases. The government permits several parties identified as "Islamically-oriented" rather than Islamist, and some have attracted substantial support, including the Party of Justice and Development (PJD), which is the largest political party in parliament and leads the current coalition government.

The constitution guarantees civil society organizations can constitute and exercise their activities in freedom, within the scope of respect for the constitution. The law on associations states that any association that seeks to undermine the monarchy, Islam, or the country's territorial integrity is invalid. Groups must register with the interior ministry, which can deny a registration based on the group's ideology. For example, the government does not recognize the Justice and Charity Organization (JCO), which rejects the preeminence of the king's spiritual authority.

The MEIA must authorize the construction of new mosques, even those constructed using private funds.

Legal provisions provide tax benefits, land and building grants, subsidies, and customs exemptions for imports necessary for the religious activities of Muslims, Jews, and foreign resident Christians.

There is no law requiring the designation of religion on passports or national identity documents. There are no prohibitions on religious clothing or symbols in either the public or private sphere.

By law, all educational institutions must teach Sunni Islam in accordance with the teachings of the Maliki-Ashari school. The government's annual education budget funds the teaching of Islam in all public schools and Judaism in some public schools. Foreign-run schools, such as the French and Spanish schools, have the option of not including any religious instruction within the school's curriculum. Private Jewish schools are able to teach Judaism.

Government Practices

The government reportedly arrested and deported an individual on accusations of proselytizing Muslims. The government discouraged conversion from Islam and continued to restrict the

distribution of non-Islamic religious materials, as well as some Islamic materials that it deemed inconsistent with the Maliki-Ashari school of Sunni Islam. Several individuals were arrested and sentenced for eating or drinking alcohol in public during the Ramadan fast. Government institutions, such as the MEIA and security services, monitored, and in some cases, restricted activities of Muslims and non-Muslims.

In February media reported that a U.S. citizen legally resident in the country for more than a decade had been arrested on allegations of Christian proselytizing in Al Hoceima. According to media reports, the individual was paying teenage girls to translate Christian materials into Tamazight (Berber) and Arabic, and police found him in possession of proselytizing materials. While media reported that authorities deported the individual to Melilla following a complaint by a neighboring Muslim cleric, the foreign ministry stated he was not arrested but "taken into protective custody" because neighborhood residents were threatening him with violence. The U.S. citizen departed the country without prosecution.

Also in February a court of appeals in Fez dismissed a charge against Mohammed El Baldi, a Moroccan convert to Christianity, on the grounds of lack of evidence. El Baldi had been arrested in 2013 for proselytizing to minors in Taounate and sentenced to two-and-a-half years in prison and a fine of 5000 dirhams (\$554).

In July five individuals were arrested in Souk El Arbaa for drinking alcohol and eating in public during Ramadan. They received the maximum sentence of six months in prison. Authorities made another arrest in July in Tiznit of an individual seen eating in public during Ramadan. The Tiznit case led to a sentence of five months in prison.

In September the government permitted its appointed caretaker to permanently resettle the approximately 30 remaining children from the Village of Hope (VOH) orphanage in Ain Leuhto to a center in Meknes acceptable to the foreign resident Christians involved with the VOH. The ultimate disposition of the children had not been settled since 2010, when the government expelled or declared persona non-grata, on accusations of proselytizing, seven foreign families who operated the VOH.

Foreigners attended religious services without restriction at places of worship belonging to officially recognized Catholic, Orthodox, or Protestant Churches. Foreign-resident Christian church officials, however, reported that Moroccan Christians rarely attended their churches, and they did not encourage them to do so to avoid accusations of proselytizing. Fears of government surveillance led most Christian, Bahai, and Shia to refrain from public worship; most met discreetly in their members' homes. Local Christians stated the authorities made phone or house calls several times a year to demonstrate they had lists of members of Christian networks and monitored Christian activities. Some Christian citizens reported authorities pressured Christian converts to renounce their faith by informing the converts' friends, relatives, and employers of the individuals' conversion.

The government continued to fund the study of Jewish culture and its artistic, literary, and scientific heritage at some universities. At the University of Rabat, Hebrew and comparative religion were taught in the Department of Islamic Studies. The monarchy also continued to support the rehabilitation of synagogues throughout the country, an effort it stated it deemed necessary to preserve the country's religious and cultural heritage and to serve as a symbol of tolerance.

The government permitted the display and sale of Bibles in French, English, and Spanish. A limited number of Arabic translations of the Bible were available for sale in a few bookshops, but authorities often confiscated Bibles they believed were intended for proselytizing. The government did not allow the free public distribution of non-Sunni Muslim religious materials.

The government generally tolerated activities limited to the propagation of Sunni Islam, education, and charity. For example, the Unity and Reform Movement, the PJD's social and religious outreach branch, operated without special restrictions. At times, the government suppressed the activities of politically active religious groups, such as the banned yet tolerated JCO. The JCO continued to organize through participation in political demonstrations and the management of internet sites, although the government occasionally prevented the organization's meetings and restricted public distribution of the JCO's published materials. The government monitored the activities of mosques and non-Muslim religious groups, and placed some restrictions on members of religious groups when it deemed their actions exceeded the bounds of acceptable religious or political activity. In February, for example, Salafi cleric Abu Naim was convicted of defamation and insulting a political figure when he pronounced *takfir* (anathematization) upon a prominent politician and vehemently denounced the political left, secularists, and certain media outlets.

The MEIA was the principal institution responsible for shaping the country's religious sphere and promoting its interpretation of Sunni Islam valuing moderation and tolerance. The MEIA provided guidance to imams and monitored Friday mosque sermons and Quranic schools to prevent what the ministry considered inflammatory or extremist rhetoric and to ensure that teaching followed approved doctrine. The ministry tried to control the sale of what it considered extremist books, videotapes, and DVDs. The government required that mosques close to the public shortly after daily prayer times to prevent use of the premises for unauthorized activity.

Broadcast media covered prominently the government's efforts to disseminate information about Islam over dedicated state-funded Quranic television and radio channels. The television channel *Assadissa* (*Sixth*) continued to function as a partnership between three governmental entities: the National Society for Radio and Television, the communications ministry, and the MEIA. Programming consisted primarily of Quran and *hadith* (traditional teachings) readings and exegesis, although it also covered health, family, youth, and social issues, highlighting the government's interpretation of Islam in traditions and practice of the Islamic legacy. It broadcast this programming in Arabic and French, as well as in Amazigh (Berber) and Hassani (Saharan dialect).

The MEIA continued to employ over 500 chief imams and over 200 female Muslim spiritual guides (*murshidat*), who taught religious subjects, provided counsel on a variety of matters, including women's legal rights and family planning, and managed programs in which men participate; however, the *murshidat* did not deliver Friday sermons in mosques or lead group prayers.

In May the king broke ground on a new royal regional imam training institute as part of a royal initiative to promote openness and tolerance among the new generation of male and female spiritual guides. Al Akhawayn University in Ifrane, a royally-sponsored university, continued to offer an advanced degree in Islamic studies with an emphasis in comparative religion, including a mastery of Greek and Hebrew, to MEIA-nominated imams and others.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

There were isolated reports of public anti-Semitism, and some Moroccan Christians reported the government did not respond to continued societal harassment. Fears of societal harassment led many non-Maliki-Ashari Muslims and non-Jewish groups to practice their faiths discreetly.

In February the Mimouna Jewish student group at Al Akhawayn University in Ifrane launched a Moroccan Jewish caravan that visited college campuses in major cities throughout the country to promote Judeo-Moroccan culture and religious tolerance.

In February the Simon Wiesenthal Center, a Jewish-American organization, publicly denounced the presence of anti-Semitic literature at an annual book fair in Casablanca. There was no indication the government promoted the literature.

In June a group of citizen human rights activists founded the Moroccan Observatory to Fight Anti-Semitism after a group of citizens sparked controversy by cancelling their visit to a Tel Aviv University annex. The founders said the group would seek to strengthen ties between citizens residing in the country and those residing in Israel, and to inform citizens objectively about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

In July a man attacked a rabbi walking to his synagogue in Casablanca, allegedly in response to the conflict in Gaza. Several days later, the same individual was reported for throwing stones at another Jewish citizen. The authorities soon apprehended the individual. In November he was sentenced to 10 months in prison and a fine of 1000 dirhams (\$111). The court acquitted him of any anti-Semitism charges.

Traditionally, Muslims in the country have characterized the Bahai Faith as a heretical deviation from Islam and consequently considered Bahais apostates. Most members of the Shia and Bahai communities avoided disclosing their religious affiliation.

Some female citizens stated it was difficult to find employment in professional sectors – including business and education, or with the army or police – if they wore a hijab, reporting that some employers either encouraged or required women to remove their headscarves during working hours.

In general, Jewish citizens attended services at synagogues and lived in safety throughout the country. Annual Jewish commemorations took place and Jewish visitors regularly visited religious sites. Muslim citizens studied at Christian and Jewish public and private schools. Muslim students constituted the majority at Jewish schools in Casablanca, and a Jewish community hospital provided care to low-income citizens regardless of religion. Jews served in high-level government positions including as a royal advisor and an ambassador-at-large to represent religious diversity and tolerance.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. government promoted religious tolerance in the bilateral strategic dialogue. The Assistant Secretary of State for Educational and Cultural Affairs led a working group that discussed interfaith dialogue and youth. The working group sponsored a joint international conference on women in monotheistic religions held in Rabat in November. The Ambassador, embassy and consulate general officers, and visiting U.S. government officials including the U.S. Special Envoy to the Organization of Islamic Cooperation, met with senior government and religious officials, including in the MEIA, as well as with Muslim religious scholars, leaders of the Jewish community, Christian foreign residents, leaders of registered and unregistered Christian groups, and other local religious groups to promote religious freedom. The U.S. government sponsored programs focused on religious tolerance and freedom. During Ramadan, the Ambassador hosted an interfaith iftar for Moroccan and visiting U.S. religious leaders.

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