



2014 Report on International Religious Freedom - Jordan

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Executive Summary

The constitution forbids discrimination on the basis of religion. The constitution stipulates that Islam is the "religion of the State," but provides for freedom to practice one's religion in accordance with the country's customs unless this violates public order or morality. The government continued to deny official recognition to some religious groups, and continued to monitor citizens and foreign residents suspected of proselytizing Muslims. Members of unregistered groups faced legal discrimination and administrative hurdles. King Abdullah and other high officials spoke publicly about the importance of religious tolerance, including during the visit of Pope Francis and after the arrival of several thousand Christian refugees fleeing violence in Iraq.

Relations between Muslims and Christians were generally peaceful, although there were brief violent clashes in Ajloun after a man confessed to murdering his daughter because of her conversion from Christianity to Islam. Converts to Christianity from Islam reported security officials occasionally interrogated them about their religious beliefs and practices.

The U.S. Ambassador and other embassy officials discussed religious freedom with the government, including protecting the rights of religious minorities. The embassy supported exchange and outreach programs that promoted religious tolerance.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the population is 7.9 million (July 2014 estimate), 97.2 percent of which is Sunni Muslim. Christians are 2.2 percent of the population, and groups that together constitute less than 1 percent of the population include Shia Muslims, Bahais, and Druze. These estimates do not include migrant workers or Syrian refugees, a population the Jordanian government estimates at 1.4 million and is made up of largely Sunni Muslims.

Christians tend to live in urban areas such as Amman, Fuhais, and Madaba. Migrant workers from South and East Asia are often Christian or Hindu.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution provides for the freedom to practice the rites of one's religion in accordance with the customs that are observed in the country, unless the government deems they violate morality or public order. The constitution stipulates there shall be no discrimination in the rights and duties of citizens on grounds of religion, but also notes that the state religion is Islam and the king must be a Muslim. The government accords primacy to sharia for Muslims in matters of personal or family status. Personal or family status cases in which one party is Muslim and the other is non-Muslim are heard by sharia courts and decided according to sharia law. Denomination-specific religious tribunals handle personal status matters for Christians. Christians whose denominations lack tribunals may take their cases to the civil courts, which adjudicate them according to the laws and beliefs of the relevant denomination.

The constitution mandates that matters concerning personal status, including religion, marriage, divorce, child custody, and inheritance, are under the exclusive jurisdiction of religious courts. Muslims are subject to the jurisdiction of sharia courts except in cases that are explicitly addressed by civil status legislation.

Islamic law governs all matters relating to family law involving Muslims or the children of a Muslim father. Minor children of male citizens who convert to Islam are considered Muslims. In accordance with Islamic law, adult children of a man who has converted to Islam become ineligible to inherit from their father if they do not also convert to Islam. All citizens, including non-Muslims, are subject to Islamic legal provisions regarding inheritance if no equivalent inheritance guidelines are codified in their religion or if the state does not recognize their religion.

Matters of personal status of non-Muslims whose religion the government officially recognizes are under the jurisdiction of denomination-specific courts of religious communities. There are six such courts: Greek Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Melkite Catholic, Armenian Orthodox, Coptic, Syrian Orthodox, and Anglican. According to the Council of Christian Denominations Law, which parliament passed in July, members of recognized denominations that lack their own courts take their cases to civil courts, which follow the rules and beliefs of the litigants' denomination in deciding the case. There are no tribunals for atheists or adherents of unrecognized religious groups, such as the Bahai faith. Such individuals must request that a civil court hear their case. There is no legal provision for civil marriage or divorce for members of unrecognized religious groups.

The Sharia Judicial Council appoints sharia judges, while each recognized non-Muslim religious community selects the structure and members of its own tribunal. The new Council of Christian Denominations Law stipulates the cabinet must ratify each Christian ecclesiastical court's procedures. All judicial nominations must be approved by a royal decree.

The constitution and law do not explicitly ban Muslims from converting to another faith, and there are no penalties under civil law for doing so. Nonetheless, by according primacy to sharia, which prohibits Muslims from converting to another religion, the government effectively prohibits both conversion from Islam and proselytization of Muslims.

The sharia courts do not recognize converts from Islam as falling under the jurisdiction of their new religious community's laws in matters of personal status. Under sharia, these converts are considered Muslims and generally regarded as apostates. Any member of society may file an apostasy complaint against such individuals. In cases that a sharia court decides, judges can annul converts' marriages, transfer child custody to a non-parent Muslim family member or declare the

children "wards of the state," convey an individual's property rights to Muslim family members, and deprive individuals of many other civil rights.

Individuals who proselytize Muslims can be prosecuted by the State Security Court under the penal code's provisions against "inciting sectarian conflict" or "harming the national unity." Non-Muslims may convert to Islam or from one recognized non-Islamic faith to another.

Marriages between a Muslim woman and a non-Muslim man are not permitted, and the man must therefore convert to Islam for the marriage to be considered legal under sharia. If a Christian woman converts to Islam while married to a Christian man, her husband must also convert for their marriage to remain legal. If a Muslim husband and non-Muslim wife are divorced, the wife loses custody of the children when they reach seven years of age.

The Council of Church Leaders (CCL) is the government's advisory body for all Christian religious affairs. The CCL consists of the heads of the country's 11 officially recognized Christian churches and serves as an administrative body to facilitate official matters for Christian organizations, such as issuing work and land permits, and for individuals, such as issuing marriage and birth certificates, in coordination with government agencies. Unrecognized Christian denominations, despite not having full membership on the CCL, must also conduct business with the government through the council.

The 2014 Council on Christian Denominations Law lists 11 officially recognized Christian denominations: Greek Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Armenian Orthodox, Melkite Catholic, Anglican, Maronite Catholic, Lutheran, Syrian Orthodox, Seventh-day Adventist, United Pentecostal, and Coptic. Five Christian denominations are not recognized by the government as denominations but are registered as societies: the Free Evangelical Church, Nazarene Church, Assemblies of God, Christian and Missionary Alliance, and the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons). One denomination, the Jehovah's Witnesses, is unrecognized and not registered as a society. The government refers to Chaldean Christians and Syriac Catholics among its refugee population as "guests." The government does not recognize the Bahai faith, but allows members to practice their religion. Druze are registered as Muslims and allowed to practice their religion.

In the case of unrecognized Christian groups, the prime minister confers with the CCL and the minister of interior on the registration and recommendation of new churches. The government also refers to the following criteria when considering recognition of Christian churches: the group must not contradict the nature of the constitution, public ethics, customs, or traditions; the Middle East Council of Churches must recognize it; the faith must not oppose the national religion; and the group must include some citizens of the country.

Recognized non-Islamic religious institutions do not receive subsidies but are tax exempt.

Religious institutions must be accorded official recognition through application to the prime minister's office to own land and administer rites, such as marriage. This requirement also applies to schools that religious institutions administer. Religious institutions that lack official recognition may register as societies, a status which allows them to own property. Members of unregistered Christian denominations are issued marriage certificates by the Anglican Church, which they then take to the Civil Status Bureau to receive their government marriage certificates.

Groups registered as societies rather than denominations face administrative restrictions. They must obtain government approval of their budgets and any foreign funding and notify the government of their by-laws and board members. Groups such as the Jehovah's Witnesses that are not registered as societies are subject to restrictions, lack any legal juridical status, and cannot undertake basic administrative tasks (opening bank accounts, purchasing real estate, hiring staff). These groups often designate an individual to exercise these functions.

Christians regularly serve as cabinet ministers. According to the law, Christians are allotted nine seats out of 150 seats in parliament. They are also eligible to compete for the 27 seats reserved for national list candidates. Christians may not run for the remaining 114 seats. No seats are reserved for adherents of other minority religious groups. The government classification of Druze as Muslims permits them to hold office.

The government traditionally reserves some positions in the upper levels of the military for Christians, anecdotally estimated to be approximately 4 percent; commanders at the division level and above are required to lead congregational Islamic prayer on certain occasions. While there are only Sunni Muslim chaplains in the armed forces, the government permits members of the armed forces of other religious groups to practice their religion.

The law prohibits the publication of media items that slander or insult "founders of religion or prophets" or that are deemed contemptuous of "any of the religions whose freedom is protected by the constitution," and imposes a fine on violators of up to 20,000 dinars (\$28,250).

The Ministry of Awqaf (religious endowments) and Islamic Affairs manages Islamic institutions and mosque construction. It also appoints imams, pays mosque staff salaries, manages Islamic clergy training centers, and subsidizes certain activities mosques sponsor. The government monitors sermons at mosques and requires preachers to refrain from political commentary the government believes could instigate social or political unrest. Imams who violate these rules face fines and a possible ban from preaching. There are, however, unofficial mosques in many cities that operate outside Ministry of Awqaf control, as well as imams outside of government employment, who preach without Ministry of Awqaf supervision.

Public schools provide Islamic religious instruction as part of the basic national curriculum, although non-Muslim students are allowed to opt out. The constitution provides congregations the right to establish schools to educate their communities "provided that they comply with the general provisions of the law and are subject to the control of government in matters relating to their curricula and orientation." In several cities, Christian denominations – including Baptist, Orthodox, Anglican, and Roman Catholic – operate private schools, and are able to conduct classes on Christianity. The schools are open to adherents of all religions.

Religious affiliation is required on national identification cards and legal documentation, including on marriage and birth certificates, but not on travel documents, such as passports. National identification cards and legal documentation identify individuals as either Christian or Muslim but do not specify their denominational affiliation. Atheists and agnostics must associate themselves with a recognized religion for purposes of official identification. Employment application forms for government positions occasionally contain questions about an applicant's religion.

Government Practices

The government placed obstacles to conversion from Islam. The government imposed restrictions that affected members of minority religious groups, in particular by not recognizing some groups, such as Bahais.

Members of non-Muslim religious groups who proselytize Muslims were occasionally threatened with arrest for violating public order or, in the case of foreign nationals, deportation. While neither the constitution nor the civil law prohibit conversion, converts to Christianity from Islam reported that security officials occasionally interrogated them about their religious beliefs and practices. Some converts reported worshipping in secret to avoid scrutiny by security officials. Converts from Islam to Christianity reported they feared being subject to an apostasy complaint at the sharia courts and thereby losing civil rights. They stated, however, that apostasy complaints were very rare, and converts were unaware of any such complaints filed in the last year.

Five evangelical churches – the Baptist Church, the Nazarene Church, the Free Evangelical Church, Assemblies of God, and the Christian Missionary Alliance – applied to the Ministry of Interior for permission to establish an ecclesiastical court, but the ministry refused the application in July. The Baptist Church was permitted to operate a licensed school.

The Bahai community faced official discrimination. On official identification documents, the government recorded Bahais as Muslims, left the space blank, or marked it with dashes. This had implications for the legality of certain marriages, since a woman registered as Muslim was not permitted to marry a non-Muslim man; thus a Bahai man with no officially noted religion could not marry a Bahai woman erroneously registered as Muslim. The child of a non-Muslim father and a Bahai mother registered inaccurately as a Muslim was considered illegitimate under sharia. These children were not issued a birth certificate or included in a family book (a national registration record issued to every head of family) and subsequently were unable to receive citizenship or register for school.

The Bahai community did not have its own court to adjudicate personal status matters. Neither the sharia courts nor the other recognized religious courts issued Bahais marriage certificates, which are required to transfer citizenship to a foreign spouse or to register for government health insurance and social security. The Department of Civil Status and Passports did not officially recognize marriages conducted by Bahai assemblies, but it did issue family books to Bahais, allowing them to register their children, except in cases of marriages between a Bahai man and a Bahai woman erroneously registered as Muslim.

The government did not officially recognize Bahai schools or places of worship. There were two recognized Bahai cemeteries registered in the name of the Bahai Faith. Bahais were unable to register other endowments under the name of the Bahai Faith, so they registered property under the names of individual Bahais instead. Registering endowments in the names of individuals meant the Bahais had to pay registration fees when they transferred property from one person to another at the death of the registered owner.

Members of religious groups that did not have legally recognized religious divorces sometimes converted to another Christian denomination or to Islam to divorce legally. In cases in which Christian men converted to Islam in order to divorce, their children were legally classified as Muslims and would not be able to convert back to Christianity.

Concerns continued over the CCL's capacity to effectively and fairly manage the affairs of both recognized and unrecognized Christian denominations. Some established Christian churches opposed extending recognition to newer evangelical groups.

On national identity cards and family books, which normally identify the bearer's religious community, the government recorded Druze as Muslims. Druze worshipped at mosques and at social halls belonging to the Druze community. Druze were permitted to worship freely and reported no interference or harassment by security officers.

Churchgoers continued to note the presence of security officers in civilian clothes outside the churches of some Christian denominations. Some church leaders characterized the security presence as an attempt to provide better protection following threats against Christian groups in the region. Intelligence services regularly vetted foreign participants in Christian conferences, and some participants were excluded. Government officials told church leaders that the exclusions were on security grounds or out of fear the participants would immigrate to Jordan. Some church leaders submitted names of conference participants to the intelligence services in advance to facilitate what they considered an inevitable process.

While the government traditionally reserved some positions in the upper levels of the military for Christians, Muslims held all senior command positions.

To prepare for government exams, non-Muslim students in both public and private schools must learn verses from the Quran as part of the Arabic language curriculum. The Ministry of Education revised the Arabic language curriculum for grades one, two and three. The new textbooks still include Quranic verses but give a less prominent place to religious teachings.

The national school curriculum, including materials on tolerance education, did not include mention of the Holocaust, nor did the government respond publicly to anti-Semitic material in the media.

In May the government hosted a visit by Pope Francis that included a meeting with King Abdullah. The king publicly expressed appreciation for the pope's message of peace and tolerance and extolled the efforts of Jordanian Muslims and Christians to build "a shared future, on the common ground of mutual respect, peace, and devotion to God."

In September the government began facilitating the arrival of several thousand Iraqi Christian refugees fleeing the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant. As of late September, Jordan had welcomed about 3,200 Christian refugees from Iraq. The king and other government officials emphasized that Jordan would continue to be a safe haven for Arab Christians facing persecution.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

There were reports of violence and discrimination against religious converts and individuals in interfaith romantic relationships. In one case, the killing of a convert from Christianity to Islam sparked several days of violent clashes.

In May a man from the northern city of Ajloun confessed to killing his daughter after learning she had converted from Christianity to Islam. Authorities charged the man and his brother with premeditated murder. The murder, and the subsequent conflict over whether the victim should be

buried in a Muslim or a Christian cemetery, set off two days of protests and violent clashes, in which rioters burned several houses. The government dispatched security forces to contain the violence, and the clashes subsided after the intervention of tribal and community leaders.

Some converts from Islam and Christianity reported facing social ostracism, threats, and physical and verbal abuse from their families and religious leaders. Some converts from Islam to Christianity reported they worshipped in secret because of the social stigma they faced as converts. Citizens also reported that interfaith romantic relationships led to ostracism and, in some cases, feuds among family members and violence toward the individuals.

Editorial cartoons, articles, and public statements by politicians sometimes depicted negative images of Jews and conflated anti-Israel sentiment with anti-Semitic sentiment.

On September 17, *Al Rai*, a government-associated newspaper, ran an editorial cartoon showing an anti-Semitic stereotype and implying that Jews exert control over world politics.

During a February televised debate over parliament's call to expel the Israeli ambassador from Jordan, member of parliament Yahya al Saud, chanted: "Oh Khaiber, Khaiber, oh you Jews, the army of Muhammad shall return," referring to the defeat of the Jewish population of Khaibar by Muslim armies in 629.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. Ambassador and other embassy officials raised religious freedom issues with both high-ranking and working-level government officials. Issues raised included encouraging greater interfaith dialogue and protecting the rights of religious minorities. Embassy officers also met frequently with leaders and members of the various religious communities, including unrecognized groups, private religious organizations, and interfaith institutions, to discuss their views on religious freedom in the country and how conditions in the country affect their organizations and members.

The embassy continued to send national religious scholars, teachers, and leaders to the United States on exchange programs designed to promote tolerance and a better understanding of religious freedom as a fundamental human right and source of stability.

The embassy brought a U.S. Muslim journalist to university campuses in the country to speak to students and professors about tolerance, acceptance, and interfaith relations. The embassy also sponsored performances of a play that explored interfaith relations and the role of religion in promoting civil rights.

In response to questions from the public about the situation of Muslims in the United States, the embassy posted several videos on social media, featuring embassy officials discussing religious tolerance and religious freedom in the United States.