



Print Friendly Version!

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF STATE
Home | Contact Us | FOIA | Privacy Notice | Access | Security
About the State Department | Press & Public Affairs | Travel & Living Abroad
Countries & Regions | International Topics & Issues | History, Education & Culture
Business Center | Other Services | Employment

Jordan

International Religious Freedom Report Released by the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor October 2001



The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, provided that religious practices are consistent with "public order and morality," however, the Government imposed some restrictions on freedom of religion. 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.

Relations between Muslims and Christians in the country generally are amicable. 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 dialog and policy of promoting human rights.

Section I. Religious Demography

The country has a total area of 55,436 square miles and its population is approximately 5 million persons. Over 95 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. There also are at least 20,000 Druze, a small number of Shi'a Muslims, and less 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 particular 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 Coptic Christianity and there are a number of both Chaldean and Syriac Christians and Muslim Stras represented in the immigrant Iraqi population.

Among the foreign missionaries operating in the country are the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (Mormons); Jehovah's Witnesses; Campus Crusaders for Christ; Life Agape; Intervarsity; Navigators; (Mekite); Arab World Ministries; Operation Mobilization; Southern Baptist International Mission Board; the Conservative Baptist; Frontiers; Brother Andrew; Jesuits; Christian Brothers; Rosary Sisters; Benedictines; Anglican Church Mission Society; the Society of Friends (Quakers); Convent Sisters; Little Sisters of Jesus; the Religious of Nazareth; Sisters of St. Dorothy; the Daughters of Mary the Helper (Salesian Sisters); 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; Theatines Institute; and the Missionaries of Charity.

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 is predominantly Druze, as is Umm Al-Jabal in the city of Mafraq. There also are significant populations of Druze in Amman and Zarqa, and a smaller number of Druze in Irbid and Ajlun. There are a number of nonindigenous Shi'a

living in the Jordan Valley and the south of the country,

Section II. Status of Religious Freedom

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. The Constitution also states that "there shall be no legal discrimination with regard to Jordanians' rights and duties based on race, language, or religion." However, some members of unrecognized religious groups and religious converts from Islam face legal discrimination and bureaucratic difficulties in personal status cases.

According to the Constitution, Islam is the state religion. 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 legal recognition as religions. Since 1988 the Prime Minister has unofficially conferred with an interfaith council of bishops representing 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 recognition of Christian churches as separate official religions: 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.

According to the Government, the role of the State in religious affairs is limited to supervision. Groups that have practices that violate the law and the nature of Jordanian society—such as Satan worship—are prohibited.

Religious institutions, such as churches 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.

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 for Christians, and Christians may request leave for other Christian feasts prescribed by the local Council of Bishops.

Religious instruction is mandatory for all Muslim students in public schools. Christian and Bahai¹ students are not required to attend courses in Islam. In 1996 the late King Hussein and the Ministry of Education approved religious instruction for Christian students in public schools. In 1998 the Government established an experimental program in four districts to incorporate Christian education in the public school curriculum. In 1999 the local Council of Bishops approved the use of the Syrian model of catechism in these last districts, however, the program has not progressed due to a lack of follow-up by both the Ministry of Education and the local Christian hierarchy.

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 the control of government in matters relating to their curricula 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 facilitated the holding of two international Christian conferences in government facilities in September 2000 and May 2001.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

The Government does not recognize the Druze or Bahai' faiths as religions but does not prohibit the practice of the faiths. Druze face official discrimination but do not complain of social discrimination. Bahai's face both official and social discrimination. The Government does not record the bearer's religion on national identity cards issued to Druze or Bahai's. The small Druze and Bahai' 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 Bahai's 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, such as encouraging Muslims to convert to the Christian faith--considered legally incompatible with Islam--are prohibited.

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. 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, in practice this principle is not applied. According to the Government, 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 still are considered Muslims under Shari'a. Conversely, converts to Islam fall 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 has never been applied.

According to one Christian cleric, the Government does not generally prohibit citizens from proselytizing if it is within the limits of the law and based on "the principle of maintaining personal security and safety and is provided that it does not contradict the customs and traditions of society." Government policy requires that foreign missionary groups (which the Government believes are not familiar with the customs and traditions of Jordanian society) refrain from public proselytizing "for the sake of their own personal safety from fundamentalist members of society that oppose such practices." The Government has taken action against some Christian proselytizers in response to the complaints of recognized Christian groups who charge that the activities of these missionaries "disrupt the cohesiveness and peace between religious groups in the society."

There were some reports of local government officials encouraging Christian families involved in relationships with Muslim males to convert to Islam to diffuse family or tribal disputes caused by the relationship (see Section III). However, there were no known cases in which local officials harassed or coerced individuals to convert during the period covered by this report.

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.

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 civil marriage. 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. These 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 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 in which 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, and the minor children of a male Muslim who converts to Christianity continue to be treated as Muslims under the law.

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 of these individuals convert to another Christian denomination or the Muslim faith in order to divorce legally.

The Government notes individuals' religions (except for Druze, Bahais, 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 have been traditionally reserved for Muslims. Division-level commanders and above are required to lead Islamic prayer for certain occasions. There are no Christian

clergy in the military.

In early 2000, radical Islamists criticized a poem published by Muslim poet Musa Hawamdeh. In March 2000, the Government banned the book in which the poem was published. In June 2000, Hawamdeh was summoned to a Shar'a court to face allegations of apostasy. The complainant requested that Hawamdeh publicly retract the controversial statements in his poem and requested that the Shar'a judge order that he divorce his wife and lose his rights to inherit property or manage his own wealth. The Shar'a court referred the case to a civil court. In July 2000, Hawamdeh, without retracting any portion of his poem, was acquitted on all charges in both the Shar'a and civil courts. However, according to June 2001 press reports, the Shar'a appeals court ordered Hawamdeh retried on the apostasy charge. According to some reports, the retrial is based on a procedural error; however, some observers believe that the procedural error is being used as a pretext to continue harassing the poet. At the end of the period covered by this report, most observers believed that the Shar'a court would find Hawamdeh innocent of apostasy.

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. The church reopened in December 2000 with permission from the Government, but was closed again a week later based largely on pressure from the Orthodox hierarchy. The Government stated that the church was free to open under a different name that would not imply affiliation with the Orthodox Church. The church remained closed at the end of the period covered by this report (see Section III).

Non-Jordanian Christian missionaries operate in the country but are subject to restrictions. Christian missionaries may not proselytize Muslims. During the period covered by this report, U.S.-affiliated Christian mission groups in the country continued to complain of bureaucratic difficulties, including refusal by the Government to renew residence permits.

In February 2000, the governor of the Amman municipality closed the office of Life Agape--an organization associated with the Baptist Church--after the director refused to sign a letter stating that he would not "deal with Muslims." The office remained closed at the end of the period covered by this report.

In April and September 1999, a foreign employee of a small language school in Amman applied for a residence permit from the Ministry of Interior. His application was denied, reportedly because government officials believed that he had been trying to convert Muslims to Christianity. He reapplied in April 2000 and was still awaiting a response from the Government at the end of the period covered by this report.

In December 1999, the municipality of Amman closed the Roy and Dora Whitman Academy--a small, nonprofit school founded by U.S.-affiliated missionaries in Amman -- because it was not registered with the Ministry of Education. The board of the academy had initiated the process of registering the school in 1997. 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 received registration and once again began teaching students. In July 2000, the Ministry of Labor issued work permits to two faculty members at the school.

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 May 1999, permission was granted to purchase the land on the condition that JETS receive accreditation from the Ministry of Education. In May 1999, JETS submitted its first application for registration to the Council of Higher Education (CHE). However, pending such registration authorities suspended renewal of the residence permits of all of the seminary's 36 foreign students 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 JETS. In mid-1999, the Ministry of Interior issued visas and residence permits to some students and staff of JETS. However, in September 1999, JETS received a letter from the CHE stating that it had postponed reviewing the application until "a complete strategy for higher education was in place." 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 accreditation from the Ministry of Education. JETS reapplied for registration in January 2000. In May 2000, the Secretary General of the CHE told JETS that the CHE may not register colleges that have religion as the only discipline of study. In February 2001, JETS submitted a third application to the Ministry of Education with an expanded curriculum. At the request of the CHE, the application also contained a new name without the word "evangelical" -- Jordan Mirra University. At the end of the period covered by this report, the school's application still was pending, and the Ministry's failure to issue visas has affected 24 of 140 students (and their families), as well as 4 staff members at the school.

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 only served in those facilities catering specifically to

tourists.

Of the 80 seats in the Lower House of Parliament, 9 are reserved for Christians. No seats are reserved for Druze or adherents of other religious faiths. The country's parliamentary election law historically has limited the number of Islamists elected to Parliament. The major Islamic political party boycotted the 1997 elections, stating that the election law must be amended before it will participate in future elections. On June 16, 2001, the King dissolved Parliament and charged the Government with drafting a new election law. 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 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.

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

Under Shar'a as applied in the country, female heirs receive half the amount of a male heir's inheritance, and the non-Muslim widow of Muslim spouses has no inheritance rights. A sole female heir receives half 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.

Shar'a as applied in the country regards the testimony of a woman to be equal to half that of a man. This provision technically applies only in religious courts; however, in the past it has been imposed in civil courts as well, regardless of religion.

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, the security services detained approximately 50 persons, described in the press as "Islamists" during the period covered by this report. These detentions were related to allegations of involvement in terrorist or strictly political activities rather than religious affiliation or belief.

In October 2000 and May 2001, security forces briefly detained and released several Muslim religious leaders for inciting public unrest following the outbreak of Israeli-Palestinian violence in the West Bank and Gaza.

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 Government's refusal to allow such citizens to be returned to the United States. However, according to Jordanian law the father of the 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. citizen mothers. Under the law, these children are considered Muslim if their fathers are Muslim.

Improvements and Positive Developments in Respect for Religious Freedom

In July 2000, the Ministry of Labor issued work permits to two faculty members at the Roy and Dora Whitman Academy, a small, nonprofit school founded by U.S.-affiliated missionaries in Amman.

Section III. Societal Attitudes

Relations between Muslims and Christians in the country generally are amicable. Relations within the Christian community sometimes are difficult, especially among the evangelical Christian 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 (also see Section II).

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). Bahais face some societal and official discrimination.

The majority of the indigenous population views religion as central to personal identity and religious conversions are not widely tolerated. Muslims who convert to other religions often face social ostracism, threats, and abuse from their families and Muslim religious leaders. Romantic relationships between members of different religions, which 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 in order to defuse potential family or tribal problems. However, there were no known cases in which local officials harassed or coerced persons to convert. In previous years, when the Government intervened, it sometimes placed the women concerned into "protective custody" to prevent retribution by one of the families.

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

During the period covered by this report, local newspapers occasionally published articles critical of evangelical organizations.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

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. Embassy officers assisted private religious groups to obtain official registration during the period covered by this report. 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 January 2001, the Embassy sponsored a successful program on interreligious dialog and tolerance by Dr. Mahmoud Ayoub, a professor of religion at a university in the United States.

[End]

Released on October 26, 2001

[International Religious Freedom Report Home Page](#)

This site is managed by the Bureau of Public Affairs, U.S. Department of State. External links to other Internet sites should not be construed as an endorsement of the views contained therein.