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2009 Report on International Religious Freedom - Morocco

[Covers the period from July 1, 2008, to June 30, 2009]

The Constitution provides for the freedom to practice one's religion. Islam is the official state religion, and the King is "Commander of the Faithful" and has the responsibility of protecting Islam in the country. Non-Muslim foreign communities openly practice their faiths.

There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom by the Government during the reporting period, and it continued to sporadically enforce existing legal restrictions on religious freedom. In March 2009 the Government seized Shi'a literature, interrogated Shi'a Muslims, and closed a private Iraqi school, in a stated effort to stop the spread of politicized Iranian Shi'ism. The Government also detained and interrogated a group of female citizens who had converted from Islam to Christianity and expelled five female Christian missionaries. The Government restricts non-Islamic religious materials and proselytizing. Several small religious minorities are tolerated with varying degrees of official restrictions. The Government monitors the activities of mosques and non-Muslim religious groups and places some restrictions on individuals and organizations when it deems their actions to have exceeded the bounds of acceptable religious or political activity.

There were reports of societal abuses or discrimination toward those with different religious beliefs, including converts from Islam to other religions. Many citizens believe that the country is enriched by its centuries-old Jewish minority, and Jews lived in safety throughout the country during the reporting period.

The U.S. government regularly discusses religious freedom with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights.

Section I. Religious Demography

The country has an area of 172,414 square miles and a population of 34.8 million, of which 98.7 percent is Muslim, 1.1 percent Christian, and 0.2 percent Jewish.

According to Jewish community leaders, there are an estimated 3,000 to 4,000 Jews, approximately 2,500 of whom reside in Casablanca and are the remnants of a much larger community that has mostly emigrated. The estimated size of the Rabat Jewish community is 200, and 250 live in Marrakech. The remainder of the Jewish population is dispersed throughout the country. The population is mostly elderly, with a diminishing number of young persons.

The predominately Roman Catholic and Protestant expatriate Christian community

consists of approximately 5,000 practicing members, although some estimates are as high as 25,000. Most expatriate Christians reside in the Casablanca and Rabat urban areas. Local Christian leaders estimate there are 4,000 Christian citizens (mostly Berber) who regularly attend "house" churches and live predominately in the south. Local Christian leaders estimate there may be as many as 8,000 Christians throughout the country who have made professions of Christian faith but do not regularly meet because they fear government surveillance and social persecution.

There are an estimated 3,000 to 8,000 Shi'a Muslims, most of them expatriates from Lebanon or Iraq, but also a few citizen converts. Several thousand citizens who currently reside in Europe have reportedly adopted Shi'a beliefs. The Baha'i community, located in urban areas, numbers 350 to 400 persons.

Followers of several Sufi Muslim orders undertake joint annual pilgrimages to the country. One of the most prominent of these orders is the Zaouia Tijania of which as many as 30 followers each week, mostly from West Africa, make spiritual pilgrimages to Fez to worship at the tomb of Sheikh Ahmed Tijani, who is said to have brought Islam to the subregion. The Tariqa Al-Qadiriya Al-Boutchichia, highly influential in the country, celebrates the Prophet Muhammad's birthday every year, praying with its living master, Sheikh Sidi Hamza Al-Qadiri Al-Boutchichi, in the city of Berkane.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The Constitution provides for the freedom to practice one's religion. Islam is the official state religion, and the King is "Commander of the Faithful" (referring to people of the monotheistic faiths: Muslim, Jewish, and Christian) and has the responsibility of protecting Islam in the country. All citizens, including the normally immune Members of Parliament, may be prosecuted on charges of expressing opinions alleged to be injurious to Islam. The law prohibits the distribution of non-Muslim religious materials and bans all proselytizing, but the Government tolerates several small religious minorities with varying degrees of restrictions. The Government monitors activities in mosques and of non-Muslim religious groups and places some restrictions on participants when it deems their actions have exceeded the bounds of acceptable religious or political activity.

According to article 220 of the Penal Code, any attempt to stop one or more persons from the exercise of his/her religious beliefs or from attendance at religious services is unlawful and may be punished by three to six months' imprisonment and a fine of \$14 to \$71 (115 to 575 dirhams). The article applies the same penalty to "anyone who employs incitements to shake the faith of a Muslim or to convert him to another religion." Any attempt to induce a Muslim to convert is illegal. Foreign missionaries either limit their proselytizing to non-Muslims or attempt to conduct their work discreetly.

The Government cites the Penal Code's prohibition on proselytizing in most cases in which courts ruled to expel foreign missionaries. Voluntary conversion is not a crime under the criminal or civil codes.

A 2002 law restricting media freedom states that expression deemed critical of "Islam, the institution of the monarchy, or territorial integrity" is not permitted and may be punishable by imprisonment. Satellite, internet programming, and print media are otherwise fairly unrestricted.

A small foreign Christian community operates churches, orphanages, hospitals, and schools without government restriction. Missionaries who refrain from proselytizing and conduct themselves in accordance with societal expectations are largely left unhindered; however, those whose religious activities become public face expulsion.

Foreigners attend religious services without any restrictions or fear of reprisals. Due to societal pressure, fears over government surveillance, and laws governing public

gatherings, many local non-Muslim and non-Jewish groups feel constrained not to worship publicly; some meet discreetly in their homes. Article 2 of the Public Assembly laws states that "any association founded for an illicit cause or reason, in violation of these laws, good morals/customs or which has a goal of the undermining of the Islamic religion, the integrity of the national territory, the monarchy, or calls for discrimination, is invalid."

The Government permits the display and sale of Bibles in French, English, and Spanish. There are a limited number of Arabic translations of the Bible available for sale in select bookshops. The Government does not allow free public distribution of non-Muslim religious materials.

There are two sets of laws and courts with authority over marriage, inheritance, and family matters – one for Muslims and another for Jews. The family law courts are administered, depending on the law that applies, by Muslim and rabbinical authorities who are court officials. Parliament is responsible for any changes to these laws. The judges who preside over Islamic family law courts are trained in Shari'a (Islamic law) as it is applied in the country.

Rabbinical authorities administer Jewish family courts. Personal status matters as defined by the country's interpretation of Islamic law are applicable to all other citizens. Christians inherit according to civil law. Jews inherit according to Jewish religious law. There are no legal mechanisms that recognize the country's Christian community in the same way the state recognizes its Jewish community. Non-Muslims must formally convert to Islam before they can marry a Muslim or adopt children in the country.

On request, the Government provides special protection to Jewish community members, visitors, and institutions as well as the expatriate Christian community. Annual Jewish commemorations take place around the country, and Jewish pilgrims regularly visit holy sites. Members of the country's Jewish community are represented at high levels in the Government. One serves as an advisor to the King and another as an Ambassador at Large.

The Government continued training of female spiritual guides (mourchidaat), a program begun in 2006, in part to promote moderate Islam. The Government has stated that their training is exactly the same required of male imams. Their status is equal to the imams, although they do not deliver Friday sermons in mosques, do not lead group prayers, and focus much of their work on meeting various needs of other women. Since the inception of the program, more than 200 women have been trained and appointed to leadership positions in mosques and society, teaching religious subjects, providing counsel on a variety of subjects including women's legal rights and family planning, and providing management to programs in which men participate.

The Ministry of Endowments and Islamic Affairs (MEIA) monitors and provides guidance on Friday mosque sermons and the Qur'anic schools to ensure the teaching of approved doctrine. At times the authorities suppress the activities of religion-oriented political groups but generally tolerate activities limited to the propagation of Islam, education, and charity. The Government requires that mosques close to the public shortly after daily prayer times to prevent use of the premises for unauthorized political activity, and mosques comply. Only the Government can authorize the construction of new mosques, although most mosques are constructed using private funds.

There are occasional credible reports of unauthorized or informal mosques that authorities close down because they are suspected of sanctioning extremist religious activities or not complying with MEIA standards.

The Government does not recognize al-Adl wal-Ihsan (Justice and Good Works, or AWI), an organization that rejects the king's spiritual authority. The AWI advocates an Islamic state, continues to organize and participate in political demonstrations, and operates websites, although the Government does not allow the public distribution of its published materials.

Government informers monitor mosques, university campuses, and religious activities, primarily those conducted by Islamists. Authorities also frequently monitor registered expatriate Christian church services and leadership meetings but do not interfere with their activities.

In the past, the Government has denied permanent residency to some non-Muslim religious clergy who are members of unregistered religious organizations and delayed according it to others.

The following Islamic holy days are national holidays: the Birth of the Prophet Muhammad, Eid al-Fitr, Eid al-Adha, and Islamic New Year. Other religious groups observe their holy days without interference from government authorities.

Political parties founded on religious, ethnic, linguistic, or regional bases are prohibited by law. The Government permits several parties identified as "Islamic oriented" to operate, and some have attracted substantial support, including the Party of Justice and Development (PJD), the third largest party in Parliament.

The Government requires religious groups to register in order to undertake financial transactions and other business as private associations and legal entities. Registered churches and associations include the Catholic, Russian Orthodox, Greek Orthodox, French Protestant, English Protestant, and Anglican Churches. During the reporting period, the Government did not license or approve new religious groups or religious organizations.

The Government provides tax benefits, land and building grants, subsidies, and customs exemptions for imports necessary for the religious activities of the major religious groups, namely Muslims, Jews, and Christians.

The Government's annual education budget funds the teaching of Islam in all public schools and Judaism in some public schools.

The Ministry of Culture cosponsored the rehabilitation of three of the country's most ancient synagogues in Fez. The Government also funds the study of Jewish culture and its artistic, literary, and scientific heritage at some universities. At the University of Rabat, Hebrew and comparative religion are taught in the Department of Islamic Studies. Throughout the country, approximately 13 professors teach Hebrew. The country is the only Arab nation with a Jewish museum.

The MEIA continues to fund a graduate-level theological course, part of which focuses on Christianity and Judaism, and another that trains both men and women to be counselors and teachers in mosques.

The Government does not require the designation of religion on passports or national identity documents, either explicitly or in code. It permits individuals to reflect their religious identity through clothing, but they must conform to cultural norms.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

The Government generally enforced existing legal restrictions on religious freedom.

During the reporting period, the Ministry of Interior continued to monitor proselytizing activities, especially those of Shi'a Muslims and Christians. On April 2, 2009, a government spokesman stated, "the Kingdom, whose foundations are grounded in Islam and the Sunni Maliki rite, can never tolerate serving as a hotbed for spreading Shi'ism and Christian proselytizing. The fight against Christian proselytizing in accordance with law cannot be considered among human rights abuses, for it is an action aimed at preventing attempts to undermine the country's immutable religious values. The freedom of belief does not mean conversion to another religion."

In March 2009 the Government seized Shi'a tracts and literature from libraries and bookstores throughout the country. There were also reports of hundreds of Shi'a Muslims being questioned by police about their faith and political affiliations. The Ministry of National Education shut down a private Iraqi school, operating in the country for more than 30 years, after allegations that the school was teaching Shi'a principles, a charge that school officials denied. Local media reported continued questioning of Shi'a Muslims in Casablanca throughout April 2009. Authorities claimed these measures were a reaction to a politicized Iranian Shi'ism that violated the country's laws against using religion for political purposes.

On November 10, 2008, the MEIA informed Parliament that it had signed an agreement with the Ministry of Interior (MOI) that gives the latter the power to "protect mosques as secure places of worship." Authorities stated that these measures have eliminated the exploitation of mosques for political propaganda, such as distributing pamphlets, raising funds for illicit organizations, and disseminating extremist ideas. Some local mosque leaders reported that this step has little or no effect on the majority of local Muslims who attend daily prayers. However, those who adhere to a non-Malikite form of Islam felt pressure from authorities not to voice publicly their religious ideas in local mosques. There were reports that those who did not conform to the Malikite majority were watched and followed closely in an effort to ensure they did not espouse extremist ideology.

The country joined Algeria and Tunisia in banning the October 30, 2008, edition of *L'Express International*, a French newsmagazine, stating that its cover story, "The Jesus-Mohammed Shock," offended Islam. The British Broadcasting Corporation quoted the country's information minister as saying that the issue breached article 29 of the country's press code but did not specify the precise content the Ministry regarded as offensive. The issue discussed the relationship between Christianity and Islam and featured a front cover image for the Moroccan market showing the Prophet Muhammad with his face covered, rather than exposed as on the French edition. Government officials stated, "Our country should not be used by anyone to spread articles that could be prejudicial to our religion or undermine public order."

In his September 27, 2008, address before the ordinary session of the Higher Council of Ulema, the King called for the formation of a national council of religious leaders who would work to ensure that citizens living in Europe are not swayed by radical or heretical ideas. It is believed that the ideas referred to include extremist Wahhabi teachings and Shi'a Islam.

In September 2008 the MEIA suspended six imams in the southern town of Taroudant for teaching what it deemed an unapproved and extreme form of Islam and, among other acts, for allowing the marriage of young girls. Subsequently, the Ministry closed the religious schools at which they taught. This followed the MEIA's closure of dozens of madrassas (religious schools) affiliated with an imam who sparked controversy with a fatwa that was interpreted to permit the marriage of girls as young as nine years old on the grounds that the decision encouraged pedophilia, which is criminalized by law. The imam took refuge in Saudi Arabia but later returned.

Members of the Berber community and other citizens, including some members of non-Muslim religious communities, complained of difficulty in registering children's names that were deemed "non-Muslim" by authorities. Most received permission, but only after a lengthy bureaucratic appeal process that sometimes lasted two years. After much discussion in the press, the Minister of Interior stated there was officially no restriction on names, but registration of non-traditional names remained difficult in practice.

During the reporting period, the AWI continued to evolve into more of a political rather than religious organization and maintained a relatively low profile. The Government continued to prohibit AWI from holding public meetings, referring to the organization as one using religion for political purposes. In January 2009 government authorities blocked several websites affiliated with the organization after they were used to organize sit-ins and demonstrations during a conflict transpiring between Israel and Gaza. Although the

AWI is based upon a religious ideology, the authorities' actions to restrict its activities and prosecute its members were in response to political activities and did not represent restrictions on religious freedom per se.

There were no reports of religious prisoners or detainees in the country.

Abuses of Religious Freedom

In March 2009 authorities expelled five female non-resident foreigners, four Spanish and one German, and interrogated 12 others, 11 of them citizens, for participating in a women's Bible study held in a private apartment of a local Christian leader in Casablanca. The authorities detained the 12 women on March 28, released them early the following morning, and discretely returned them home in unmarked police cars. The authorities reportedly pressured the women to return to Islam, mocked their Christian faith, questioned why they left Islam to become Christians, and asked if there were other Christians in their families. Agents of the police and security reportedly confiscated all the Bibles and other books that were stored in a room of the apartment – which is utilized as a stock room by the owner for his book shop – in addition to a computer and cellular phones. As of the end of the reporting period, the Government had returned only the cellular phones. The authorities reportedly accused the foreigners of proselytizing but did not officially charge anyone with committing a crime. On May 14, 2009, the Government reportedly denied entry to two of the Spanish women when they attempted to reenter the country.

Forced Religious Conversion

There were no reports of forced religious conversion, including that of minor U.S. citizens who had been abducted or illegally removed from the United States or who had not been allowed to be returned to the United States.

Improvements and Positive Developments in Respect for Religious Freedom

The Government worked to counter extremist ideology in the name of religion by promoting religious tolerance.

During the reporting period, the MEIA continued to revise national school curriculums to remove passages and lessons that interpret Qur'anic passages in ways that incite hatred or disrespect women, other cultures, and other religions. Additionally, the Ministry's closed-circuit television network broadcasts approved religious messages and sermons to more than 2,000 mosques daily.

During the July 2008 Throne Day ceremony, the King granted national medals of appreciation to two prominent Jews of Moroccan origin. As part of the festivities marking the 1,200th anniversary of the founding of the city of Fez, government officials organized a conference in Casablanca in October 2008 to celebrate the contributions of Jews in the nation's history.

The Government continued to encourage tolerance, respect, and dialogue among religious groups. In March 2009 the country was instrumental in creating a new "Civil Alliance for Citizenship in the Arab World." This new alliance gathers several NGOs and personalities active on citizenship-related issues in the Arab world. It was created, in part, to promote political pluralism and religious, social, cultural, and linguistic diversity as sources of richness in Arab and Islamic societies. It also participated in a February 2009 conference to combat anti-Semitism in London that brought together more than 300 legislators from 42 countries to champion tolerance throughout the world.

During the Islamic holy month of Ramadan, which corresponded to September 2008, the King hosted an annual colloquium of Muslim religious scholars from around the world, including the United States, which considered ways to promote moderate and peaceful religious interpretations and encouraged tolerance and mutual respect within Islam and

with other religions.

The Government participates in the Alliance of Civilizations, the Anna Lindh Foundation (whose president is a Moroccan Jew), and other international groups that promote religious tolerance.

On May 29-June 6, 2009, the 15th annual "Fez Festival of Sacred Music," which included musicians from Muslim, Christian, Jewish, Hindu, Buddhist, and other spiritual traditions, was held.

On April 18-25, 2009, the country hosted the 3rd annual Fez Festival of Sufi Culture. The festival celebrates the principles of tolerance, peace, and spirituality through music, art, discussions, and lectures. Another April cultural festival featured European Jewish music "from the stetl to New York."

On April 16-19, 2009, the 9th annual "Spring Musical of the Alizes" festival, featuring musicians and singers from the three monotheistic religions and different nationalities, was held in Essaouira.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

There were reports of societal abuses or discrimination toward those with different religious beliefs, including converts from Islam to other religions. Free expression in religious matters is tolerated; however, society discourages public efforts to proselytize.

Jewish citizens openly practiced their faith and lived in safety throughout the country during the reporting period. Many citizens of all religions believe that the country is enriched by its centuries-old Jewish minority and were increasingly vocal expressing that view. Muslim citizens study at Christian and Jewish schools. Muslim students constitute the majority at Jewish schools in Casablanca, and a hospital run by the Jewish community provides care to low-income citizens regardless of religion.

The Muslim majority overwhelmingly accepts its Jewish citizens, and Jewish community leaders speak highly of the respect and acceptance they feel in the country. Government officials report that more than 25,000 Jewish tourists visit the country every year, many for pilgrimage to religious sites, and are generally welcomed. The Jewish community in the country was the focus of some isolated negative reactions during the Israel-Gaza conflict (December 27, 2008-January 21, 2009), but the situation normalized once the conflict ended.

During this reporting period, some Christian citizens reported that they were not allowed to rent villas in tourist areas for Christian-themed retreats, had their backpacks searched randomly by unidentified agents, had their passports confiscated by officials, and sometimes experienced extensive delays or refusals in attempts to renew passports. Local Christian leaders said that they believe they are constantly followed by authorities but that the rejection they experience comes mostly from family and friends and not the Government.

Many Muslims view the Baha'i faith as a heretical offshoot of Islam and consequently consider Baha'i apostates. Most members of the Baha'i community avoid disclosing their religious affiliation; however, concerns about their personal safety and property do not prevent their functioning in society, and some hold government jobs.

There is widespread consensus among Muslims regarding religious practices and interpretation. However, some dissenters challenge the religious authority of the King and call for the establishment of a government more deeply rooted in their vision of Islam. The Government views such dissent as political rather than religious in nature, since critiques relate largely to the exercise of power.

Several interfaith associations, such as the Judeo-Rifian Association and the Islamic-

Christian Research Group, promoted religious understanding to combat intolerance.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. government regularly discusses religious freedom with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights. U.S. Embassy officials encountered no interference from the Government in making contacts with members of any religious group.

U.S. government officials met regularly with religious officials, including in the MEIA and other senior ministry officials, Muslim religious scholars, leaders of the Jewish community, Christian missionaries, the leaders of the registered Christian communities, and other local religious groups, including Muslim minorities. The U.S. government sponsored programs focusing on religious tolerance and freedom using the U.S. model.

U.S. government officials also met regularly with members of religious communities to promote tolerance and freedom. Officials actively promoted and facilitated meetings between the MEIA and visiting U.S. religious leaders.
