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IRB – Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada

Algeria: Situation of individuals who have converted from Islam to Christianity, including treatment by society and authorities; availability of state protection (2014-May 2015) [DZA105210.E]

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1. Overview

Sources report that Islam is the state religion of Algeria (Algeria 2008, Art.2; *Jeune Afrique* 11 July 2014). According to Freedom House, the majority of the population of Algeria is Sunni Muslim (Freedom House 2014). According to sources, the Roman Catholic Church and the Protestant Church of Algeria (Église protestante d'Algérie, EPA) are officially recognized by the Algerian government (US 28 July 2014, 3; World Watch Monitor 3 Dec. 2012). However, sources report that each church affiliated with the Protestant Church of Algeria is required to obtain individual official registration from the government (ibid.; US 28 July 2014, 3). According to the US Department of State's *International Religious Freedom Report for 2013*, "unofficial estimates of the number of Christians in Algeria vary between 20,000 and 100,000, although these estimates cannot be confirmed" (ibid., 2). An article published on Babelmed, a cultural website about the Mediterranean region that conducts "regular survey cycles on major issues that concern all the Mediterranean territory," including "the plight of young people, migration, [and] gender relations" (Babelmed n.d.), similarly notes that there is an estimated 20,000 to 100,000 evangelical Christians in Algeria, who practice their faith in mainly unregistered churches in the Kabyle region (ibid. 13 Nov. 2014).

According to the US Department of State *International Religious Freedom Report for 2013*, "[c]onversion and apostasy are not illegal" in Algeria (US 28 July 2014, 5). Sources report that Ordinance 06-03 limits the practice of non-Muslim religions (*Jeune Afrique* 11 July 2014; US 30 July 2012, 3). According to the US Department of State, Ordinance 06-03

provides for the freedom of non-Muslims to practice religious rites, on condition that the exercise thereof is in keeping with the ordinance, the constitution, and other laws and regulations, and that public order, morality, and the rights and basic freedoms of others are respected.

[...]

Ordinance 06-03, enforced since February 2008, limits the practice of non-Muslim religions, restricts public assembly for the purpose of worship and calls for the creation of a national commission to regulate the registration process for non-Muslim religious groups. (ibid.)

The US Department of State further explains that under Ordinance 06-03,

[p]roselytizing by non-Muslims is a criminal offense and carries a maximum punishment of one million dinars [C\$12,466] and five years' imprisonment for anyone who "incites, constrains, or utilizes means of seduction tending to convert a Muslim to another religion Making, storing, or distributing printed documents ... with the intent of "shaking the faith" of a Muslim may also be punished in this manner, but the government does not always enforce these restrictions. (ibid. 28 July 2014, 5)

According to *Jeune Afrique*, the former minister of Religious Affairs, Abdellah Temine, said in 2006 that [translation] "curbing conversions and the activism of evangelical churches were the objectives of Ordinance 06-03" (11 July 2014). Corroborating information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

The US Department of State indicates that according to a new law on the right of association enacted in 2012, "[a]ll previously registered religious groups [had to] comply with the regulations set forth [in that] new law by January 2014, including new registration requirements" (US 28 July 2014, 7). According to World Watch Monitor, a Christian news website, in 2014, the Protestant Church of Algeria, along with NGOs including Amnesty International "called for the abolishment of [this] law, which they say would hamper their work" (World Watch Monitor 10 Jan. 2014). The same source states that this new law would "further limit the activities of churches in Algeria" (ibid.). Further information on the implementation of the regulations under the law could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

The Tablet, a British Catholic journal (*The Tablet* n.d.), reports that according to Algeria's Bible distributor, Bible Society, "thousands" of Muslims in Algeria have been requesting bibles and converting to Christianity (ibid. 8 May 2015). According to the same source, "hundreds of people every month" were coming to request a Bible and "thousands" were enquiring about Christianity at churches (ibid.). Similarly, in an interview with Open Doors USA, the US chapter of non-profit organization Open Doors which supports "persecuted Christians in more than 60 countries" (Open Doors n.d.), Mustapha Krim, a Protestant pastor in the country and former president of the EPA, describes the current growth rate of the Algerian Church as being "like a rolling snowball, growing bigger and bigger. ... [with] zeros at the end of the growth numbers" (ibid. 12 May 2015). The *International Religious Freedom Report for 2013* noted the absence of statistics on the number of religious conversions in the country for that year (US 28 July 2014, 2).

In an article published on the religious information website *Fait-religieux.com*, Karima Dirèche, Director of the Tunisia-based Institute of Maghreb Contemporary Research (IRMC), a component of the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs that "contributes to research in Human and Social Sciences on the Maghreb region" (Eldis n.d.), writes that the emergence of converts to evangelical Christianity began 15 years ago and this group has since established their presence in the political and religious spheres of the country (*Fait-religieux.com* 21 Feb. 2014). Dirèche explains that evangelical Christians are politically active in that they openly [translation] "defend their rights in judiciary processes" (*ibid.*). Corroborating information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

Reporting on the growth of evangelical Christians in the Muslim world, including in Algeria, Middle East news website *les Clés du Moyen-Orient* notes that a [translation] "large number of conversions to evangelical Christianity" are observed in the Kabyle and Berber regions of Maghreb (3 Nov. 2014). However, according to *Kabyle.com*, an online publication focussing on Kabyle and North Africa, the [translation] "evangelisation of Algerians" exists not only in the Kabyle region, but also throughout the country (3 Feb. 2015).

Sources report that converts to Christianity include women (*Open Doors USA* 22 Jan. 2015; *Fait-religieux.com* 21 Feb. 2014) and men (*ibid.*).

2. Treatment of Converts from Islam to Christianity by Society

In correspondence with the Research Directorate, an associate professor of sociology and Middle East studies at the University of Texas in Austin provided the following information:

[t]he scholarly literature and life stories suggest that converts from Islam to Christianity experience much hardship and discrimination in general in Algeria. There may be slightly less of this in [Kabyle] where I understand that such conversions have occurred more frequently.

[Converts from Islam to Christianity] are treated as outcasts. In a society where social solidarity is based on ties of kinship and community, they become outsiders to their kin group and community of origin. (Associate Professor 18 June 2015)

OpenDemocracy, a website dedicated to human rights and democracy that "aims to ensure that marginalized views and voices are heard" (*OpenDemocracy* n.d.), similarly notes the existence of "intolerance" and "discrimination" against Christians by Algerian society (*ibid.* 27 Feb. 2015). The same source reports that "[a]n Algerian Muslim who converts to Christianity is despised because s/he has given up her faith to embrace the ex-enemy's religion" and that they may receive "rape or death" threats, including by

individuals who are "not religiously devout" (ibid.). Corroborating information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

According to Babelmed, Algerian Christians are not subject to [translation] "population displacements or physical attacks" (13 Nov. 2014). Corroborating information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

Open Doors USA's *World Watch List* states that converts from Islam to Christianity in Algeria face societal "pressure" from members of their family (2015). Open Doors USA reports on the story of a 21-year old woman who converted from Islam to Christianity and who first hid her conversion from her parents because "becoming a Christian [was] seen as a disgrace" on the family (Open Doors 3 Jan. 2014). The article reports that when the woman's conversion was exposed to her family, her father asked her to renounce practising her Christian faith or she would have to stop her university studies and leave home (ibid.). Open Doors USA reports on another female Christian convert who, after being "under pressure from her Muslim parents," was only able to practice her Christian faith freely "once she was married to a man who shared her faith" (ibid. 22 Jan. 2015). According to the woman in the article, many women who have converted from Islam to Christianity face "new challenges" including "rejection and humiliation from their families," renunciation by their husbands on account of their faith, being "deprived of their children in the case of divorce from a Muslim spouse," "house arrest imposed by the family," and "forced marriages" to a Muslim spouse (ibid.).

The French chapter of Open Doors, Portes Ouvertes France (Open Doors n.d.), reports on a man who converted from Islam to Christianity in his twenties who alleges that [translation] "he was forced by his parents to go and get treated by a psychiatrist" because of his conversion (28 May 2014). *Morning Star News*, an independent news service that reports on the persecution of Christians (*Morning Star News* n.d.), describes the case of a Christian man whose Muslim wife was seeking to divorce him after his conversion from Islam to Christianity and who had prevented him from seeing their daughter (ibid. 23 Jan. 2014). According to the man in the article, the judge presiding over a reconciliation session between him and his wife first requested that he "recant his new faith" as a way to avoid their divorce, obliged the wife to let the man see their daughter, and adjourned the case (ibid.). Further and corroborating information on these cases could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

According to Open Doors USA, Muslim family members exert "extra pressure" on Christian converts during Ramadan to participate in the fast despite their new faith (3 July 2014). Corroborating information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

3. Treatment of Converts from Islam to Christianity by Authorities and State

Protection

Information on the treatment of converts from Islam to Christianity by authorities and on state protection was scarce among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

According to Freedom House,

small non-Muslim communities do not face harassment. However, non-Muslims may gather only at state-approved locations, proselytism by non-Muslims is illegal, and the government in 2008 began enforcing an ordinance [Ordinance 06-03] that tightened restrictions on minority faiths. (Freedom House 2014)

Still, Freedom House indicates that in 2013, "some" Christians were "harasse[d]" at their place of worship (ibid.). Babelmed reports that converts to Protestantism face administrative hurdles from Algerian authorities, such as [translation] "long delays" when trying to get authorization to give a Christian name to their child (Babelmed 13 Nov. 2014).

According to the Associate Professor, "Algerian authorities look negatively on such conversions [from Islam to Christianity]" (Associate Professor 18 June 2015). Without providing further details, the same source stated that authorities do not appear to have "provided protections to converts" (ibid.). Corroborating information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

An article published by the Pharos Observatory for Cultural and Religious Pluralism, a network of researchers and observers whose mission is to advocate for cultural and religious pluralism (Pharos Observatory n.d.), describes Mohamed Aïssa, the new Minister of Religious Affairs appointed in 2014, as being more open and moderate towards religions other than Islam, contrary to his predecessor (ibid. 3 Apr. 2015). According to *Jeune Afrique*, Aïssa's goal is to be the minister of "all religions" (11 July 2014). The Algerian newspaper *DK News* cites Mohamed Aïssa as saying that "the number of converts to Christianity in Algeria 'is minimal and [that] they do not constitute a threat to the State of Algeria'" (17 Oct. 2014).

The Algerian newspaper *El Watan* reports that in March 2015, two young people were stopped by the police on the road between the cities of El Bayadh and Tiaret for transporting 56 bibles in their car, which was perceived as proselytizing (*El Watan* 17 Mar. 2015). According to the same source, the police set them free but kept their bibles (ibid.). Corroborating information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

This Response was prepared after researching publicly accessible information currently available to the Research Directorate within time constraints. This Response is not, and does not purport to be, conclusive as to the merit of any particular claim for refugee protection. Please find below the list of sources consulted in researching this Information Request.

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Oral sources: Attempts to contact the following were unsuccessful within the time constraints of this Response: Institute of Maghreb Contemporary Research (IRMC); Ligue algérienne pour la défense des droits de l'homme.

Internet sites, including: Afrik.com; Aleteia; Algeria 360; Algérie-Focus; Algeria-Watch; Amnesty International; Berkley Center for Religion, Peace and World Affairs; Christian Solidarity Worldwide; *La Croix*; *La Dépêche de Kabylie*; Dernières nouvelles d'Algérie; Dreuz.info; ecoi.net; *L'Expression*; Factiva; International Federation for Human Rights; Fédération protestante de France; Human Rights Watch; International Christian Concern; Minority Rights Group International; L'Observatoire de la christianophobie; L'Observatoire de la liberté religieuse; SIWEL; SlateAfrique; *Le Soir d'Algérie*; *Le Temps d'Algérie*; Tout sur l'Algérie; United Bible Societies; United Nations – Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, Refworld; World Council of Churches.

ecoi.net summary:

Query response on situation of converts from Islam to Christianity from 2014 to May 2015 (treatment by society and authorities; state protection)



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