



2015 Report on International Religious Freedom - Jordan

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 to Muslims. Security officials occasionally interrogated converts to Christianity from Islam about their religious beliefs and practices. Members of unregistered groups faced legal discrimination and administrative hurdles. King Abdullah continued to call on citizens to respect what he termed was the country’s long history of religious tolerance and coexistence and stressed the government’s duty to protect all citizens and the country’s guests, including refugees, regardless of religion.

Converts to Christianity from Islam reported violence, ostracism, and discrimination. Individuals reported interfaith romantic relationships led to ostracism and, in some cases, feuds among family members and violence toward the individuals.

The U.S. Ambassador and other embassy officials raised religious freedom issues with the government and religious leaders, including protecting the rights of religious minorities. The embassy supported exchange and outreach programs that promoted religious tolerance. In March the embassy held three roundtable discussions which included unrecognized religious groups and discussed combating violence and extremism while preserving citizens’ ability to freely practice their faiths.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the population at 8.1 million (July 2015 estimate). According to U.S. government estimates, Sunni Muslims are 97.2 percent of the population, Christians are 2.2 percent, and groups that together constitute less than 1 percent include Shia Muslims, Bahais, and Druze. These estimates do not include migrant workers or Syrian refugees. The Ministry of Labor (MOL) issued 321,000 work permits for migrant workers who are largely from Egypt, South and East Asia, and Africa; workers from Africa and South and East Asia are often Hindu or Christian. The national government estimates the Syrian refugee population at 635,000, which is largely made up of Sunni Muslims.

Christians tend to live in urban areas such as Amman, Fuhais, and Madaba.

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 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 the state religion is Islam and the king must be a Muslim.

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 explicitly addressed by civil status legislation. 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.

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 law, members of recognized denominations that lack their own courts take their cases to civil courts which, in principle, should 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 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. 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."

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 regarded as apostates. Any member of society may file an apostasy complaint against such individuals. In cases decided by a sharia court, judges can annul converts' marriages, transfer child custody to a nonparent Muslim family member or declare the children "wards of the state," and convey an individual's property rights to Muslim family members.

Marriages between a Muslim woman and a non-Muslim man are not permitted, and the man must 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.

Sharia 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 and are not legally allowed to reconvert to their father's prior religion or convert to any other religion. In accordance with sharia, 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.

Non-Muslims may convert to Islam or from one recognized non-Islamic faith to another.

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 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 Baptists. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons) and the Jehovah's Witnesses are unrecognized and not registered as societies.

In determining whether to register or recognize Christian groups, the prime minister confers with the Council of Church Leaders (CCL), a government advisory body, and the minister of interior. The government also refers to the following criteria when considering recognition of Christian groups: 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.

Religious institutions must be accorded official recognition to own land and administer rites such as marriage. Recognized non-Islamic religious institutions do not receive subsidies but are tax exempt. 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.

Religious institutions registered as societies may own property. Groups registered as societies must obtain government approval of their budgets and any foreign funding and notify the government of their bylaws and board members. Groups such as the Jehovah's Witnesses that are not registered as societies lack legal judicial status and cannot undertake basic administrative tasks such as opening bank accounts, purchasing real estate, or hiring staff. These groups often designate an individual to exercise these functions.

The government has not required registration of religious groups among refugees.

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 "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 order

to operate a school, religious institutions must also receive permission through the Ministry of Education, which ensures the curriculum meets national standards, but the Ministry of Education does not oversee religious courses at religious institutions. 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.

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

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 in coordination with government agencies. Unrecognized Christian denominations, despite not having representatives in the CCL, must also conduct business with the government through the council.

The law requires religious affiliation be stated 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 are often registered under the religious affiliation of their families. Converts from Islam to Christianity are not allowed to change their religion on their identification card because conversion away from Islam is not allowed in sharia. Converts from Christianity to Islam can change their religion on their identification documents.

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.

Government Practices

The government continued to place obstacles to conversion from Islam. 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.

The Ministry of Awqaf (religious endowments) and Islamic Affairs managed Islamic institutions and mosque construction. It also appointed imams, paid mosque staff salaries, managed Islamic clergy training centers, and subsidized certain activities mosques sponsored. The government monitored sermons at mosques and required preachers to refrain from political commentary that the government believed could instigate social or political unrest. Imams who violated these rules faced fines and a possible ban from preaching. There were, however, unofficial mosques in many cities that operated outside Ministry of Awqaf control, as well as imams outside of government employment who preached without Ministry of Awqaf supervision.

Reportedly, members of non-Muslim religious groups who proselytized Muslims were occasionally threatened with arrest for violating public order. In at least one case, a foreign national was deported, in part for proselytizing Muslims.

To prepare for government exams, non-Muslim students in both public and private schools were required to learn verses from the Quran as part of the Arabic language curriculum. Some citizens continued to assert the public school curriculum did not effectively promote religious diversity and tolerance and included negative examples that could incite violence against non-Muslims. The Ministry of Education stated it continued to revise the social sciences curricula in conformity with the principles of the constitution, which includes respect for the opinion of others and pluralism.

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.

The government continued to not recognize the Bahai Faith, but did not impose restrictions on religious practice. The Bahai community said it faced official discrimination. Specifically, 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 as applied by the government. 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.

Neither the sharia courts nor the other recognized religious courts issued Bahais marriage certificates, which were 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 properties under the name of the Bahai Faith and, according to Bahai sources, they registered property under the names of individual Bahais instead. Using this approach meant the Bahais had to pay registration fees when they transferred property from one person to another at the death of the registered owner, and members of the Bahai community stated that the process represented a large financial burden.

The government recorded Druze as Muslims on national identity cards and family books, which normally identify the bearer's religious community. 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.

Some Christian leaders continued to note the presence of security officers in civilian clothes outside the churches of some Christian denominations, which the leaders stated they viewed as an effort to provide additional, yet discrete security to worshippers. Some church leaders stated they

appreciated security officers being placed at churches to provide extra protection to churchgoers during religious holidays and large events.

According to the Ministry of Justice and religious leaders, members of religious groups who did not have legally recognized religious divorces sometimes converted to another Christian denomination or to Islam to divorce legally. The chief of the Justice Department stated he was responsible for ensuring Christians wanting to convert to Islam did not have a pending divorce case at the Christian tribunal court so as to prevent using religious conversion for the sole purpose of obtaining a legal divorce without going to the Christian tribunal.

Some Christian leaders expressed concern the CCL did not meet regularly and lacked the capacity to effectively and fairly manage the affairs of both recognized and unrecognized Christian denominations. Some established Christian churches stated they opposed extending recognition to newer evangelical groups.

Christians served as cabinet ministers, and the government reserved some positions in the upper levels of the military for Christians; however, Muslims held all senior security positions. The government permitted non-Muslim members of the armed forces to practice their religion.

King Abdullah called on citizens to respect what he termed was the country's long history of religious tolerance and coexistence after a controversial social-commentary video, which included sexual innuendos, was posted online and led to a spur of online comments that included increasingly sectarian rhetoric aimed at the media agency's Christian owner. The king's statement stressed the government's duty to protect all citizens and the country's guests, including refugees, regardless of religion. There were fewer comments following the king's statement.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Church leaders reported domestic violence and discrimination against religious converts and individuals in interfaith romantic relationships.

Some converts from Islam and Christianity reported facing continued social ostracism, threats, government surveillance, 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.

Individuals reported interfaith romantic relationships led to continued 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 November 17, Ro'ya, a private television station, hosted a journalist drawing an editorial cartoon showing an anti-Semitic stereotype and stating that Jews were the "mother of terrorism."

Religious leaders of all faiths reported an increase in collaboration between religious groups on interfaith initiatives. For the first time, Bahais were included in interfaith conferences, religious celebrations, and World Interfaith Harmony Week.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. Ambassador and other embassy officials engaged with government officials at all levels, including the minister of awqaf, to raise interfaith issues such as rights of religious minorities and the inclusion of interfaith tolerance in the curriculum. The Ambassador also held two round table discussions with Muslim scholars and Christian leaders from both recognized and unrecognized denominations. At the round tables, the Ambassador encouraged greater interfaith dialogue, the protection of the rights of religious minorities, and the promotion of interfaith tolerance in the country's education system. Embassy officers also met frequently with leaders and members of the various religious communities, including unrecognized groups, religious converts, private religious organizations, and interfaith institutions, to discuss their views on religious freedom in the country and their ability to practice their religion freely.

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

In March the embassy held a roundtable discussion at the Royal Institute for Interfaith Studies which gathered approximately 20 representatives of different religious institutions from across the country, as well as academics and other researchers in the field. The discussion focused on how different religious leaders could work together to combat violence and extremism, while at the same time preserving their ability to freely practice their faiths.