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U.S. Department of State
Annual Report on International Religious Freedom for 1999:
Morocco

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MOROCCO

Section I. Freedom of Religion

The Constitution provides that Islam is the official religion, and designates the King as "Commander of the Faithful" with the responsibility of ensuring "respect for Islam." Although the Constitution provides for freedom of religion, only Islam, Christianity, and Judaism are tolerated in practice; however, in 1996 a small foreign Hindu community received the right to perform cremations and to hold services. Other foreign communities enjoy similar religious privileges. However, Baha'is face restrictions on the practice of their faith.

The Government does not license or approve religions or religious organizations. The Government provides tax benefits, land and building grants, subsidies, and customs exemptions for imports necessary for the observance of the major religions.

Ninety-nine percent of citizens are Sunni Muslims. The Jewish community of approximately 5,000 practices its faith freely and openly, as does the somewhat larger foreign Christian (Roman Catholic and Protestant) community.

The Baha'i community of 350 to 400 persons has been forbidden to meet or participate in communal activities since 1983.

Islamic law and tradition call for strict punishment of any Muslim who converts to another faith. Citizens who convert to Christianity and other religions sometimes face social ostracism, and in the past a small number have faced short periods of questioning by the authorities. Although voluntary conversion is not a crime under the Criminal or Civil Codes, it remains a crime under religious law and few citizens make such a distinction.

Any attempt to induce a Muslim to convert is illegal. (According to Article 220 of the Penal Code, any attempt to stop one or more persons from the exercise of their religious beliefs, or attendance at religious services, is unlawful and may be punished by 3 to 6 months of imprisonment and a fine of \$10 (95 dirhams) to \$50 (475 dirhams). The Article applies the same penalty to "anyone who employs incitements in order to shake the faith of a Muslim or to convert him to another religion.") Foreign missionaries either limit their proselytizing to non-Muslims or conduct their work quietly. The Government cited the Penal Code prohibition on conversion in most cases in which courts expelled foreign missionaries.

There were a small number of cases during the period covered by this report of foreigners being denied entry into the country at the port of Tangier because they were carrying substantial quantities of Christian materials. In June 1999, five American citizens were detained briefly and deported after they were arrested for distributing Christian materials on a train between Rabat and Tangier. In two separate incidents, four Americans and two Canadians were arrested in Meknes and Fez in February and May of 1998 on suspicion of proselytizing. Two Americans were expelled from Morocco but subsequently permitted to return, while cases against the others were dropped. At the time of those arrests, a small number of Christian citizens in Meknes were summoned for questioning but released shortly thereafter. In March 1998, authorities in Meknes expelled an American in connection with those events, but permitted him to return in April. A company in Casablanca was denied permission by the Ministry of Communications to display Bibles at a book fair in Casablanca in November 1998.

The Ministry of Islamic Affairs monitors Friday mosque sermons and the Koranic schools to ensure the teaching of approved doctrine. The authorities sometimes suppress the activities of Islamists but generally tolerate activities limited to the propagation of Islam, education, and charity. Security forces commonly close mosques to the public shortly after Friday services to prevent use of the premises for unauthorized political activity. The Government strictly controls authorization to construct new mosques. Most mosques are constructed using private funds.

The Government provides funds for the teaching of Islam in public schools, and also provides funds for religious instruction to the parallel system of Jewish public schools. The Government has funded several efforts to study the cultural, artistic, literary and scientific heritage of Moroccan Jews. The Government also recently created a chair for the study of comparative religions at the University of Rabat.

Since the time of the French Protectorate (1912-1956), a small foreign Christian community has opened churches, orphanages, hospitals, and schools without any restriction or licensing requirement being imposed. Missionaries who conduct themselves in accordance with societal expectations largely are left unhindered. Those whose activities become public face expulsion.

In January 1999, a court in Fez convicted 11 men of violating the Penal Code, which forbids eating or drinking in public during the Ramadan fast. The court levied small fines against the men, who publicly broke their fast the day before the "Eid" holiday. They did so to acknowledge publicly only Mecca's (as opposed to the Government's) authority in ending the fast.

The Government permits the display and sale of Bibles in French, English, and Spanish, but confiscates Arabic language Bibles and refuses licenses for their importation and sale, despite the absence of any law banning such books. Nevertheless, Arabic Bibles reportedly have been seen on sale in local bookstores. In May 1998, a British citizen was indicted in Tangier on a customs violation for allegedly failing to declare the importation of a commercial quantity of Bibles. The case was resolved by the payment of a \$10,000 (95,000 dirhams) fine.

During the period covered by this report, Interior Ministry officials summoned members of the small Baha'i community for questioning concerning their faith and meetings; however, fewer Baha'is reportedly were summoned than in past years. There were no reports that Baha'is were denied passports because of their religion, as was the case in previous years.

There are two sets of laws and courts--one for Jews and one for Muslims--pertaining to marriage, inheritance, and family matters. The family law courts are run, depending on the law that applies, by rabbinical and Islamic authorities who are court officials. Parliament authorizes any changes to those laws. Non-Koranic sections of Muslim Law on Personal Status are applied to non-Muslim and non-Jewish persons. Alternatively, non-Muslim and non-Jewish foreigners in Morocco may refer to their embassies or consulates for marriage, divorce, inheritance, and other personal issues if they choose not to adhere to Moroccan law.

The Government regularly organizes events to encourage tolerance and respect among religions. In May 1999, King Hassan II organized the first meeting of the "World Union of Moroccan Jews" in Marrakech. In March 1999, Princess Lalla Meriem spoke of the importance of tolerance between religions and cultures in a major speech attended by U.S. First Lady, Hillary Rodham Clinton. The Government annually organizes in May the "Fez Festival of Sacred Music," which includes musicians from many religions. The Government has organized numerous symposiums among local and international clergy, priests, rabbis, imams and other spiritual leaders in the past to examine ways to reduce religious intolerance and to promote interfaith dialog. Each year during the Islamic holy month of Ramadan, the King hosts colloquiums of Islamic religious scholars to examine ways to further tolerance and mutual respect within Islam and between Islam and other religions.

There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom during the period covered by this report.

Islamist dissident Sheikh Abdessalam Yassine has remained under house arrest in Sale since 1989 for refusing to acknowledge the religious authority of the King. In October 1998, the Government of Prime Minister Abderrahmane Youssouffi stated that it intended to end Yassine's detention, and an appeal of Yassine's detention was expected to be heard before the Supreme Court. In April 1999, the Minister of Housing (and number two official in the Prime Minister's governing party) declared that Yassine's detention could not continue. Yassine's books and articles are sold only at some bookstores although editorials calling for his release are published without impediment. Yassine's Justice and Charity Organization (JCO) has an active presence on university campuses and occasionally organizes protests of his continued house arrest. However, prominent members of the JCO are subject to constant surveillance and are sometimes unable to obtain passports and other necessary documents.

Fewer than 50 Islamists are serving sentences for offenses that range from arms smuggling to participating in a bomb attack on a hotel in Marrakech. However, a small number of these prisoners remain in prison for having called for an Islamic state in 1983.

There were no reports of the forced religious conversion 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.

Section II. Societal Attitudes

Tolerance is widespread, and relations between majority and minority religions are amicable. Foreigners attend religious services without any restrictions or fear of reprisals, and Jews live throughout the Kingdom in safety. While free expression of Islamic faith and even the free academic and theolo-

gical discussion of non-Islamic religions are accepted on television and radio, public efforts to proselytize are frowned upon by society. Most citizens view such public acts as provocative threats to law and order in an overwhelmingly observant Muslim country. In addition, society expects public respect for the institutions and mores of Islam, although private behavior and beliefs are unregulated and unmonitored. Because many Muslims view the Baha'i Faith as a heretical offshoot of Islam, most members of the tiny Baha'i community maintain a low religious profile. However, Baha'is live freely and without fear for their persons or property, and some even hold government jobs, albeit discretely.

Because the populace is overwhelmingly Muslim, because Islam is the religion of the State, and because the King enjoys temporal and spiritual authority through his role as "Commander of the Faithful," there is widespread consensus among Muslims about religious practices and interpretation. Other sources of popular consensus are the councils of ulemas, unofficial religious scholars who serve as monitors of the monarchy and the actions of the Government. Because the ulemas traditionally hold the power to legitimize or delegitimize kings through their moral authority, government policies closely adhere to popular and religious expectations. While dissenters such as Yassine and his followers challenge the religious authority of the King and call for the establishment of a government more deeply rooted in their vision of Islam, the majority of citizens do not appear to share their views.

Section III. U.S. Government Policy

In March 1999, the Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs, during a reception in Washington, and the First Lady, during a visit to Morocco, both noted the country's tolerance and respect for different cultures and beliefs. The Ambassador and other senior embassy officers raised religious freedom issues with senior government officials on several occasions during the period covered by this report in an effort to help resolve the few cases of restrictions on religious freedom that occurred. The issue of the continued house arrest of Sheikh Yassine, as well as the expulsions from Morocco of several missionaries, was addressed specifically with senior officials. The Embassy also maintains contact with Sheikh Yassine's lawyer and some of his associates. Embassy officials sought openly to meet directly with Sheikh Yassine and were informed by credible sources that "as a matter of principle" he would not meet with either journalists or diplomats. Embassy officials who sought to meet with Sheikh Yassine, members of his family, and his close associates encountered no interference from the Government in seeking these contacts.

The Embassy worked closely with the Government to resolve the case of a British citizen who faced punishment for a customs violation relating to the importation of a commercial quantity of Bibles (see Section I). Subsequent to embassy representations on the issue, a more serious sanction was replaced with a lighter fine and the British citizen's seized property was released from customs. In other cases, the Embassy provided the full range of consular services to Americans expelled for alleged involvement in proselytizing and also made representations at the political level with senior officials on these same cases.

The Ambassador and embassy officials also meet regularly with religious officials, including the Minister of Islamic Affairs, Islamic religious scholars, the leader of the Jewish community, and local Christian leaders and missionaries. The Embassy maintains contacts with the small Baha'i community as well.