

2013 Report on International Religious Freedom - Jordan

Publisher [United States Department of State](#)

Publication Date 28 July 2014

Cite as United States Department of State, *2013 Report on International Religious Freedom - Jordan*, 28 July 2014, available at: <http://www.refworld.org/docid/53d9075e14.html> [accessed 21 October 2014]

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Executive Summary

The constitution and other laws and policies provide for religious freedom, with some exceptions. The constitution stipulates that the state religion is Islam, but provides for the freedom to practice the rites of one's religion and faith in accordance with the customs that are observed in the country, unless they violate public order or morality. The constitution stipulates that there shall be no discrimination in the rights and duties of citizens on the basis of religion; however, the government prohibits religious practices that conflict with the official interpretation of sharia (Islamic law). The constitution notes that the king must be Muslim, and the government accords primacy to sharia in matters of personal status. Conversion from Islam is not permitted under sharia and converts risk losing their civil status rights. The government discriminates against some religious groups by refusing to officially recognize their organizations, thereby denying them the right to establish their own religious courts for personal status matters. Members of unrecognized religious groups faced legal discrimination. The government continued to monitor citizens and foreign residents suspected of proselytizing Muslims.

There were reports of societal abuse or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice. While relations between Muslims and Christians were generally peaceful, adherents of unrecognized religious groups and Muslims who converted to other religions faced societal discrimination and the possibility of family or community abuse.

The Ambassador and other U.S. government officials discussed religious freedom with the government, and the embassy supported a number of exchange and outreach programs that promoted religious tolerance.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the population is 6.5 million (July 2013 estimate), 98 percent of which is Sunni Muslim. Groups that together constitute less than 2 percent of the population include Christians, Shia Muslims, Bahais, and Druze.

Christians tend to live in urban areas such as Amman, Fuhais, and Madaba. Immigrant workers from Egypt and South and East Asia are often Christian or Hindu.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The constitution provides for the freedom to practice the rites of one's religion in accordance with the customs that are observed in the country, unless the government deems they violate morality or public order. Other laws and policies restrict religious freedom. The constitution stipulates there shall be no discrimination in the rights and duties of citizens on grounds of religion, but also notes that the state religion is Islam and the king must be a Muslim. The government prohibits religious practices that conflict with the official interpretation of sharia.

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, which apply Islamic law adhering to the Hanafi school of Islamic jurisprudence, or other schools, except in cases that are explicitly addressed by civil status legislation. Matters of personal status of non-Muslims whose religion the government officially recognizes are under the jurisdiction of denomination-specific tribunals of religious communities. There are three tribunals -- Catholic, Greek Orthodox, and Anglican -- that oversee each denomination's religious court. Members of Protestant denominations registered as "societies" may have their cases heard in the Anglican tribunal. There are no tribunals for atheists or adherents of unrecognized religious groups, such as the Bahai Faith. Such individuals must request that one of the recognized courts hear their personal status cases, or request a civil court to authenticate their documents (but not register the act). There is no legal provision for civil marriage or divorce.

Islamic law 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. In accordance with Islamic law, adult children of a male 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 their religion does not have official state recognition.

The sharia judicial council appoints sharia judges, while each recognized non-Muslim religious community selects the structure and members of its own tribunal. All judicial nominations must be approved by a royal decree.

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. However, 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. Proselytizing Muslims can be prosecuted under the penal code as "inciting sectarian conflict." Non-Muslims may convert from one recognized non-Islamic faith to another.

As the government does not allow conversion from Islam, it also does 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 generally regarded as apostates. Any member of society may file an apostasy complaint against such individuals. In cases that a sharia court decides, judges can annul converts' marriages, transfer child custody to a non-parent Muslim family member or declare them "wards of the state," convey an individual's property rights to Muslim family members, and deprive individuals of many civil rights.

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

The Council of Church Leaders (CCL) is the government's advisory body for all Christian religious affairs. 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, and for individuals, such as issuing marriage and birth certificates, in coordination with government agencies. Unrecognized Christian denominations, despite not having full membership on the CCL, must also conduct business with the government through the council.

Officially recognized Christian denominations include the Greek Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Greek Catholic (Melkite), Armenian Orthodox, Maronite Catholic, Assyrian, Coptic, Anglican, Lutheran, Seventh-day Adventist, and Presbyterian churches. Christian churches that are not officially recognized but registered as societies include the Free Evangelical Church, Nazarene Church, United Pentecostal Church, Assemblies of God, Christian and Missionary Alliance, and The Church of Latter-day Saints (Mormons). Unrecognized Christian groups that are also not registered as societies include the United Pentecostal Church and Jehovah's Witnesses. The government refers to Chaldean and Syriac Christians among its refugee population as "guests." The Baptist Church is registered as a "denomination" but does not have the full privileges of other registered religious groups.

Christians regularly serve as cabinet ministers. According to the law, Christians are allotted nine seats out of 150 in parliament. Although Christians may only run for those designated seats at the district level, they are also eligible to compete for the 27 seats reserved for national list candidates. No seats are reserved for adherents of other minority religious groups. The government classification of Druze as Muslims permits them to hold office.

The government traditionally reserves some positions in the upper levels of the military for Christians, anecdotally estimated to be about 4 percent; commanders at the division level and above are required to lead congregational Islamic prayer on certain occasions. While there are only Sunni Muslim chaplains in the armed forces, the government permits members of the armed forces of other religious groups to practice their religion.

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 of up to 20,000 dinars (\$28,249).

Religious institutions must be accorded official recognition through application to the prime minister's office to own land and administer rites, such as marriage. This requirement also applies to schools that religious institutions administer.

In the case of Christian groups, the prime minister confers with the CCL on the registration and recommendation of new churches. The government also refers to the following criteria when considering recognition of Christian churches: 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.

The Ministry of Awqaf (religious endowments) and Islamic Affairs manages Islamic institutions and mosque construction. It also appoints imams, pays mosque staff salaries, manages Islamic clergy training centers, and subsidizes certain activities mosques sponsor. The government monitors sermons at mosques and requires preachers to refrain from political commentary that the government believes could instigate social or political unrest. Imams who violate these rules face fines and a possible ban from preaching.

Recognized non-Islamic religious institutions do not receive subsidies but are tax-exempt. Groups registered as "societies" rather than denominations face administrative restrictions. They must obtain government approval of their budgets and any foreign funding and notify the government of their by-laws and board members. Groups subject to restrictions lack any legal juristic status and cannot undertake basic administrative responsibilities (opening bank accounts, purchasing real estate, hiring staff). These groups often designate an individual to exercise these functions.

The government does not recognize the Druze or the Bahai Faith, but allows members of both faiths to practice their religion.

Public schools provide Islamic religious instruction as part of the basic national curriculum, although non-Muslim students are allowed to opt out. To prepare for government-issued exams, non-Muslim students in both public and private schools must learn verses from the Quran as part of the Arabic language curriculum. The constitution provides congregations the right to establish schools to educate their communities "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 several cities, Christian denominations operate private schools, such as the Baptist, Orthodox, and Latin schools, and are able to conduct classes on Christianity. They are open to adherents of all religions.

Employment application forms for government positions occasionally contain questions about an applicant's religion. Religious affiliation is required on national identification cards and legal documentation, including on marriage and birth certificates, but not on travel documents, such as passports.

Atheists and agnostics must associate themselves with a recognized religion for purposes of official identification.

Government Practices

The government placed obstacles to conversion from Islam. The government imposed restrictions that affected members of minority religious groups, in particular by recognizing some religious groups while not recognizing others, such as Bahais.

There were no reports that the practice of any faith was prohibited, but government actions impeded the activities of some Muslim and non-Muslim groups. Members of non-Muslim religious groups were not permitted to proselytize Muslims.

Concerns continued over the CCL's capacity to effectively and fairly manage the affairs of both recognized and unrecognized Christian denominations.

The estimated hundreds of Bahais faced official discrimination. On official identification documents, Bahais encountered difficulties trying to register with the government under the category of a "society." 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 is not permitted to marry a non-Muslim man; and thus a Bahai man with no officially noted religion was prevented from marrying a Bahai woman who was erroneously registered as Muslim.

The Bahai community did not have its own court to adjudicate personal status matters; such cases were heard in civil registrars, courts governed by sharia, or other recognized religious courts upon request. However, neither the Sharia courts nor the other recognized religious courts issued marriage certificates to Bahais. Marriage certificates 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. Members of the Bahai Faith said that the Department of Civil Status and Passports had been generally cooperative, but administrative obstacles continued to make it difficult for Bahai marriages to be registered and family books issued. Additionally, the child of a non-Muslim father and a Bahai mother registered inaccurately as a Muslim was considered illegitimate under sharia. These children were not issued a birth certificate or family book and subsequently were unable to receive citizenship or register for school. The government did not officially recognize Bahai schools or places of worship. There were two recognized Bahai cemeteries, but the cemetery in Adasieh was registered in the name of the Ministry of Awqaf and Islamic Affairs, despite requests to register it under the Bahai Faith.

On national identity cards and "family books," which normally identify the bearer's religious community, the government recorded Druze as Muslims. The government did not officially recognize the Druze temple in Azraq; four social halls belonging to the Druze were registered as "societies."

Churchgoers continued to note the presence of security officers in civilian clothes outside the churches of some Christian denominations. Some church leaders characterized the security presence as an attempt to provide better protection following threats against Christian groups in the region. Intelligence services regularly vetted foreign participants in Christian conferences, and some participants were excluded. Government officials told church leaders that the exclusions were on security grounds or out of fear the participants would immigrate to Jordan. Some church leaders submitted names of conference participants to the intelligence services in advance to facilitate what they considered an inevitable process.

In parliamentary elections, 10 Christians won seats, one of them as a national list candidate. There were seven Christians serving in the 75-member upper house of parliament.

While the government traditionally reserved some positions in the upper levels of the military for Christians, Muslims held all senior command positions.

Members of religious groups that did not have legally recognized religious divorces sometimes converted to another Christian denomination or to Islam to divorce legally. A Christian man who converted to Islam in order to divorce his wife wanted to reconvert and remarry her, but he was unable to do so. His two teenage sons were legally classified as Muslims and would not be able to convert back to Christianity.

On November 12, Al Rai, a government-associated newspaper, ran an editorial cartoon showing an anti-Semitic stereotype representing the Israeli government.

Government Inaction

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.

In February vandals desecrated several Christian gravestones in a Muslim-Christian cemetery in East Amman. Although Christian leaders were told that an investigation was underway, as of the end of the year no one was arrested for the act.

Improvements and Positive Developments in Respect for Religious Freedom

The Department of Civil Status and Passports assisted in registering at least one Bahai marriage. A Jordanian man and an Egyptian woman, both of the Bahai Faith, were able to register their marriage and receive a family book. Members of the Bahai Faith saw this as a positive government step in addressing their civil status issues.

The government sponsored events and programs supporting religious tolerance and interfaith dialogue, including an official conference entitled "The Challenges Facing Arab Christians," hosted by the king and inaugurated by Prince Ghazi bin Muhammad. The organizers, however, did not invite evangelical Christians to the conference.

At the 16th Conference of the Royal Aal al-Bayt Institute for Islamic Thought, the king called for the rejection of ethnic and sectarian violence, emphasizing the 2004 Amman Message, which called for countering religious extremism and stressing the peaceful and tolerant nature of Islam.

Converts to Christianity from Islam who had previously experienced harassment from government intelligence services reported that they had not been followed or interrogated in recent years.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

There were reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice.

Some converts from Islam and Christianity reported facing social ostracism, threats, and physical and verbal abuse from their families and religious leaders. Citizens also reported that interfaith romantic relationships led to ostracism and, in some cases, feuds between family members and violence toward the individuals.

A local Islamic group threatened a Christian man who converted to Islam to divorce his wife and then sought to reconvert, with no success. The man continued to attend his local mosque and stated he was afraid he would be fired from his job if his religious beliefs were known.

Sometimes charges of apostasy were leveled by family members seeking to prevent someone from inheriting property, or in order to gain advantage in legal disputes.

Editorial cartoons, articles, and opinion pieces sometimes depicted negative images of Jews and conflated anti-Israel sentiment with anti-Semitic sentiment.

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Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The Ambassador and other embassy officials raised religious freedom issues with both high-ranking officials and working-level contacts. Issues raised included legal alternatives to legitimize religious groups that the government has not officially recognized, encouraging greater interfaith dialogue, and protecting the rights of religious minorities. Embassy officers also met frequently with leaders and members of the various religious communities, as well as with private religious organizations and interfaith institutions, to discuss their views on religious freedom in the country and how these conditions affect their organizations and members.

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

The embassy translated a prominent academic's book on interfaith dialogue. The author visited Jordan as part of an embassy speaker's program, and met with students, professionals, journalists and leading youth activists in Amman, Ma'an, and Mafraq to discuss interfaith dialogue. The embassy distributed materials related to interfaith dialogue on a regular basis to members of the public.

During Ramadan, the embassy hosted a number of iftar dinners, several of which included Christian participants.

The Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Conflict and Stabilization Operations attended the conference "Challenges Facing Arab Christians," along with the Ambassador and other embassy officials. The conference, which was sponsored by the king and inaugurated by Prince Ghazi Bin-Mohammed, the king's chief advisor for religious affairs, called for interfaith dialogue and tolerance and rejected violence against Christians.

The embassy administered a U.S. government grant supporting a local radio program that discussed religious tolerance and interfaith dialogue, and issued a report with a series of recommendations to improve religious freedom and better protect religious minorities.
