

U.S. Department of State

Annual Report on International Religious Freedom for 1999:

Jordan

Released by the Bureau for Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor
Washington, DC, September 9, 1999

I. Freedom of Religion

JORDAN

The Constitution provides for the safeguarding of "all forms of worship and religious rites in accordance with the customs observed in the Kingdom, unless such is inconsistent with public order or morality;" however, the Government imposes some restrictions on freedom of religion. Citizens may not always practice the religion of their choice. According to the Constitution, Islam is the state religion.

Islamic institutions are managed by the Ministry of Religious Affairs and Trusts, which appoints imams and subsidizes certain activities sponsored by mosques. Religious institutions, such as churches that wish to receive official government recognition, must apply to the Prime Ministry for registration. The Protestant denominations registered as "societies" come under the jurisdiction of one of the recognized Protestant churches for purposes of family law, such as divorce and child custody. The Government does not recognize a number of religions.

Over 90 percent of the population are Sunni Muslim, and approximately 6 percent are Christian. Neither Islam nor the Government recognizes religious faiths other than the three main monotheistic religions: Islam, Christianity, and Judaism. In addition, not all Christian denominations have been accorded official government recognition. Officially recognized denominations include the Greek Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Greek Catholic (Melkite), Armenian Orthodox, Maronite Catholic, and the Assyrian, Anglican, Lutheran, Seventh-Day Adventist, United Pentecostal, and Presbyterian Churches. Other churches, including the Baptist Church, the Free Evangelical Church, the Church of the Nazarene, the Assembly of God, and the Christian Missionary Alliance, are registered with the Ministry of Justice as "societies" but not as churches. There are also small numbers of Shi'a and Druze, as well as adherents of the Bahai' Faith. There are no statistics available on citizens who are not of any particular religious faith.

The Government does not interfere with public worship by the country's Christian minority. However, although the majority of Christians are allowed to practice freely, some activities, such as proselytizing or encouraging conversion to the Christian faith--both considered legally incompatible with Islam--are prohibited. Christians are subject to aspects of Shari'a (Islamic law) that designate how inheritances are distributed.

The Government does not recognize Jehovah's Witnesses, the United Pentecostal Church, the Church of Christ, or the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, but each denomination is allowed to conduct religious services and activities without interference.

The Government does not recognize the Bahai' Faith as a religion but does not prohibit the practice of the faith. However, Bahai's face both official and societal discrimination. The Government does not record the bearer's religion on national identity cards issued to Bahai's, nor does it register property belonging to the Bahai' community. Adherents of the Bahai' Faith are considered as Muslims for purposes of family and inheritance law. Unlike Christian denominations, the Bahai' community does not have its own court to adjudicate personal status and family matters. Bahai' personal status matters are heard in Shari'a courts.

With few exceptions, there are no major geographic concentrations of particular religious groups. The city of Husn, in the north, is mostly Christian, and Fuhcis, near Amman, is also predominantly Christian. Madaba and Karak, both south of Amman, have significant Christian populations.

Non-Jordanian Christian missionaries operate in the country but are subject to restrictions. Christian missionaries may not proselytize Muslims. In late 1998 and early 1999, U.S.-affiliated Christian mission groups in the country complained of increased bureaucratic difficulties, including refusal by the Government to renew residence permits. One couple affiliated with the Anglican Church was accused of converting a Muslim minor to Christianity and ordered to leave the country. The couple stated that the minor in question had been attending their church for several months before they met him.

The Jordanian Evangelical Theological Seminary (JETS), a Christian training school for pastors and missionaries, applied in August 1998 for a permit to purchase land on which to construct a seminary and campus. In April 1999, permission was granted to purchase the land on the condition that the JETS register and receive accreditation from the Ministry of Education. Pending such registration, authorities suspended renewal of the residence permits of all of the seminary's foreign students (who come from 14 foreign countries), and 2 members of the faculty. As a result of their association with the JETS, noncitizen Arab Muslim students have been deported or asked to leave the country. For his participation in the school, Iraqi national Hakim Ismael was jailed in December 1998 for approximately 2 weeks in a cell with 30 to 40 other inmates, many of whom had been accused of common crimes. Following his incarceration, Ismael was released and advised to leave the country. In January 1999, another JETS student, Mahoud Ali Mabrouk, was jailed for 2 weeks and then deported to Egypt. In February a Sudanese national, Alaa El Din Ali, was jailed for 17 days and then deported to the Sudan.

In November 1998, the authorities ordered the closure of the regional office of ICI, an educational branch of the U.S.-based Assemblies of God churches, for an alleged violation of the health code. Although an Amman court later found the citation to have no basis in law, the ICI regional director was nevertheless ordered to vacate the premises, from which Christian literature was distributed. In February 1999, the ICI regional director, a 9-year resident in the country, reapplied for a residence permit as an Assemblies of God missionary but his application initially was denied, and no reason was given for the denial. The missionary's residence permit later was issued in May.

In April 1999, a church worker with Campus Crusade for Christ (or Life Agape) was detained on the campus of the University of Jordan while leading a bible study session for a small group of students. He was taken to a detention center of the Government's General Intelligence Directorate (GID) where he was held for 3 days, questioned about his religious activities, and told to provide the names of individuals who had attended religious events with him. He was denied an opportunity to contact his family. After 3 days, he was transferred to a detention facility in Amman and held in a 16-square-foot cell with 40 other detainees, who all shared one toilet. The religious worker was released 2 days later after signing a statement that he would cease his "controversial" religious activities. He has since been barred from entering the university's campus.

The Government notes individuals' religions (except for Baha'is) on the national identity card and "family book" (a national registration record issued to the head of ever family that serves as proof of citizenship) of all citizens.

The Constitution provides that congregations have the right to establish schools for the education of their own members "provided that they comply with the general provision of the law and be subject to the control of government in matters relating to their curricula and orientation."

Shari'a is applied in all matters relating to family law involving Muslims or the children of a Muslim father, and all citizens, including non-Muslims, are subject to Islamic legal provisions regarding inheritance.

The law prohibits non-Muslims from proselytizing Muslims. Conversion to the Muslim faith by Christians is allowed; however, a Muslim may not convert to another religion. Muslims who convert to other faiths complain of social and government discrimination. The Government does not fully recognize the legality of such conversions. Under Shari'a converts are regarded as apostates and legally may be denied their property and other rights. However, this principle is not applied. Converts from Islam do not fall under the jurisdiction of their new religion's laws in matters of personal status and still are considered Muslims under Shari'a, although the reverse is not true. Shari'a prescribes a punishment of death for conversion; however, there is no equivalent statute under national law.

The Political Parties Law prohibits houses of worship from being used for political party activity. The law was designed primarily to prevent Islamist parliamentarians from preaching in mosques.

Two major government-sponsored institutions have been established to promote interfaith understanding: the Royal Institute for Interfaith Studies and the Royal Academy for Islamic Civilization Research (Al Bayt Foundation). Both institutions sponsor research, international conferences, and discussions on a wide range of religious, social, and historical questions from the perspective of both Muslims and Christians.

There were no reported cases of forced conversion. However, all minor children of a male citizen who converts to Islam are automatically considered to be Muslim. Adult children of a male Christian who has converted to Islam become ineligible to inherit from their father if they do not themselves convert to Islam. In cases where a Muslim converts to Christianity, the act is not legally recognized by the authorities, and the subject continues to be treated as a Muslim in matters of family and pro-

perty law, and the minor children of a male Muslim who converts to Christianity continue to be treated as Muslims under the law.

Religious instruction is mandatory for all Muslim students in public schools. Christian and Bahai students are not required to attend courses in Islam.

During the Muslim holy month of Ramadan, all citizens, including non-Muslims, are forbidden to eat or drink in public during daylight hours and may not sell, purchase, or consume alcohol in a public place.

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

The security services detained approximately 50 persons, described in the press as "Islamists," during the period covered by this report. These detentions appear related to allegations of involvement in terrorist or strictly political activities rather than religious affiliation or belief.

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. However, according to Jordanian law the father of the child may restrict the child's travel. There reportedly are at least 20 cases of U.S. citizen children residing in Jordan against the will of their U.S. mothers, and perhaps many more. Under the law, these children automatically are considered Muslim because their fathers are Muslim.

Section II. Societal Attitudes

Relations between Muslims and Christians in the country are generally amicable.

In general Christians do not suffer discrimination. Christians hold government positions and are represented in the media and academia approximately in proportion to their presence in the general population. Bahai's face some societal and official discrimination. Their faith is not recognized officially, and Bahai's are classified as Muslims on official documents, such as the national identity card (see Section I). Christian and Bahai children in public schools are not required to participate in Islamic religious instruction.

Muslims who convert to other religions often face social ostracism, threats, and abuse from their families and Muslim religious leaders.

Employment applications occasionally contain questions about an applicant's religion.

Section III. U.S. Government Policy

U.S. Embassy officials have raised religious freedom and other human rights issues with government authorities on a number of occasions. The Embassy's human rights officer has met frequently with members of the various religious and missionary communities in the country, as well as with private religious organizations. The Embassy's American Citizens' Services officer is in regular contact with

members of the American missionary community in the country, many of whom serve as emergency wardens. In addition, the Ambassador had a number of discussions in March and April 1999 with senior government officials, regarding both specific cases and general concerns about religious freedom issues.

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