

JORDAN 2012 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution and other laws and policies provide for religious freedom, with some exceptions, and in practice, the government generally respected religious freedom. The trend in the government's respect for religious freedom did not change significantly during the year. 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 notes that the king must be Muslim, and the government accords primacy to Sharia (Islamic law). The constitution also stipulates that there shall be no discrimination in the rights and duties of citizens on grounds of religion; however, the government prohibits religious practices that conflict with the official interpretation of Sharia. Conversion from Islam is not permitted under Islamic law and any such converts risk losing civil rights. The government sometimes tried to induce converts to revert to Islam. Members of unrecognized religious groups faced legal discrimination. The government continued to monitor members of the Bahai Faith, a few Muslim converts to Christianity, and some citizens and foreign residents suspected of proselytizing Muslims. Security services continued to monitor Christian churches and leaders for their protection, which Christians generally welcomed.

There were reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice. While relations between Muslims and Christians were generally peaceful, adherents of unrecognized religions and Muslims who converted to other religions faced societal discrimination and the threat of mental and physical abuse from their families and community members.

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

According to government estimates, the population is over 6.9 million, 98 percent of which is Sunni Muslim. Estimates of the number of Christian citizens vary from 1 to 2 percent of the population. Shia Muslims, Bahais, and Druze constitute less than 1 percent of the population.

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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, Assemblies of God, Christian and Missionary Alliance, and The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons). Unrecognized Christian denominations not registered as “societies” include the United Pentecostal Church and Jehovah’s Witnesses. The government refers to Chaldean and Syriac Christians among the Iraqi refugee population as “guests.” The Baptist Church is registered as a “denomination,” but does not enjoy the full privileges of other registered religious groups in the country. The government does not recognize the Bahai Faith as a religion.

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 and faith 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 directly 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 Islamic law courts, which apply Islamic law adhering to the Hanafi school of Islamic jurisprudence, 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 – which oversee the denomination’s respective religious courts. Members of Protestant denominations registered as “societies” may have their cases heard under 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

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status cases. There is no legal provision for civil marriage or divorce. Members of religious groups that do not have legally recognized religious divorces sometimes convert to another Christian denomination or to Islam to divorce legally.

Islamic law governs all matters relating to family law involving Muslims or the children of a Muslim father. 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. 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.

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 Islamic law, which prohibits Muslims from converting to another religion, the government effectively prohibits both conversion from Islam and proselytizing Muslims. 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 Islamic law, these converts are considered to be Muslims and generally regarded as apostates. Any member of society may file an apostasy complaint against them. In cases that an Islamic law 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.

The Council of Church Leaders is the government's advisory body for all religious affairs for Christians. The council consists of the heads of the country's 11 officially recognized Christian churches and serves as an administrative body to facilitate official matters for Christians, such as issuing work permits, land permits, and marriage and birth certificates, in coordination with government agencies.

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Unrecognized Christian denominations, despite not having full membership on the council, must also conduct business with the government through the council.

Christians regularly serve as cabinet ministers. In July parliament passed a new Electoral Law that increases the number of seats in the lower house from 120 to 150, while maintaining the Christian quota at nine seats. 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; however, Muslims hold all senior command positions. 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 press and publications 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 (\$28,000).

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 Council of Church Leaders 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

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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 these restrictions include The Free Evangelical Church, the Church of the Nazarene, the Assemblies of God, and the Christian and Missionary Alliance.

The government allows the Druze to practice their religion, even though it does not recognize their religion. On national identity cards and “family books,” which normally identify the bearer’s religious community, the government records Druze as Muslims. The government does not officially recognize the Druze temple in Azraq; four social halls belonging to the Druze are registered as “societies.”

The government also does not recognize the Bahai Faith, and Bahais face official discrimination. On national identity cards and family books, the government records Bahais as Muslims, leaves the space blank, or marks it with dashes. This has implications under Islamic law for the legality of certain marriages, as a woman registered as Muslim is not permitted to marry a non-Muslim man; thus a Bahai man with no officially noted religion could be prevented from marrying a Bahai woman who has been erroneously registered as Muslim. The Bahai community does not have its own court to adjudicate personal status matters; such cases may be heard in courts governed by Islamic law or other recognized religious courts upon request. However, neither the Sharia courts nor the other recognized religious courts will issue marriage certificates to Bahais. Marriage certificates are 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 does not officially recognize marriages that Bahai assemblies conduct, but does issue family books to Bahais. Additionally, the child of a non-Muslim father and a Bahai mother registered inaccurately as a Muslim is considered illegitimate under Islamic law. These children are not issued a birth certificate or family book and subsequently are unable to receive citizenship or register for school. The government does not officially recognize Bahai schools or places of worship. There are two recognized Bahai cemeteries, but the cemetery in Adasieh is registered in the name of the Ministry of Awqaf and Islamic Affairs, despite requests to register it under the Bahai Faith.

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Public schools provide Islamic religious instruction as part of the basic national curriculum, although non-Muslim students are allowed to leave the classroom during these sessions. 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 that are open to adherents of all religions, such as the Baptist, Orthodox, and Latin schools, and they are able to conduct classes on Christianity.

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.

The government observes the following religious holidays as national holidays: the Birth of the Prophet Muhammad, Eid al-Fitr, Eid al-Adha, the Islamic New Year, Christmas, and the Gregorian calendar New Year. Christians traditionally are given leave from work on Christian holidays approved by the Council of Church Leaders, such as Palm Sunday and Easter.

Government Practices

There were no reports of abuses of religious freedom; however, the government imposed numerous restrictions that affected members of minority religious groups.

During the year, security services summoned a few converts from Islam to Christianity for questioning after family members complained to authorities about their conversion. Security services personnel reportedly questioned the converts’ beliefs, threatened court and other actions, and offered rewards to them for denouncing the conversion, including employment opportunities. These converts also reported that security service personnel withheld certificates of good behavior required for job applications or to open a business, and directed employers to fire them.

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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. Christians were not permitted to proselytize Muslims. Some religious groups, while allowed to meet and practice their faith, faced official discrimination and additional scrutiny during attempts to form secular non-governmental organizations.

Concerns continued over the Council of Church Leaders' capacity to effectively and fairly manage the affairs of both recognized and unrecognized Christian denominations.

Bahais encountered difficulties trying to register with the government under the category of a society. Some Bahai children also continued to face difficulty in obtaining birth certificates, which are required to register for school and to receive citizenship.

Churchgoers continued to note the presence of security officers in civilian clothes outside the churches of some Christian denominations. Church leaders characterized their presence as an attempt to provide better protection following threats against Christian groups in the region.

Some religious leaders also reported that security services summoned them for questioning on their church's activities and membership, questioned both them and their congregants about travel in and out of the country, and occasionally attempted to convert them to Islam. There were also anecdotal reports among the Iraqi refugee community of similar questioning.

In 2010 the brother of a citizen who converted from Islam to the Bahai Faith brought an apostasy case to the Amman Islamic law court to prevent his brother from inheriting from his Muslim parents. The court postponed the case on several occasions and at the year's end, suspended it indefinitely.

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.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

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

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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 members of the couple's families and violence toward the individuals.

Editorial cartoons, articles, and opinion pieces sometimes depicted negative images of Jews and conflated anti-Israel sentiment with anti-Semitic sentiment. On *Ammon News* in April, a television director criticized a Gulf TV channel for showing films sympathetic to Jews and recognizing the Holocaust.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The ambassador and other embassy officials raised religious freedom issues on many occasions with both high-ranking officials and working-level contacts. Issues raised included legal alternatives to legitimize religions that the government has not officially recognized. Embassy officers also met frequently with members of the various religious and missionary communities, as well as with private religious organizations and interfaith institutions.

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.

In June a professor of the History of Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations at the Center for Muslim-Christian Understanding at Georgetown University discussed the history of Islam in the United States and the role of women in the religious sphere with 250 waethat (female Muslim preachers) at the Ministry of Awqaf and Islamic Affairs. The conversation covered issues such as obstacles and opportunities of interfaith dialogue. In addition, the professor discussed research she conducted on Christians in the Middle East with 15 Muslim and Christian academics and held several media interviews.

In July the embassy hosted a prominent interfaith activist, founder of "Clergy Without Borders" and the Muslim Chaplain at Georgetown University, whose two-day program included discussion of interfaith dialogue with various religious leaders and university students.

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In October the embassy conducted a training session for youth to promote inter-religious dialogue. The session reinforced concepts of acceptance, cooperation, understanding, and respect.