

# MOROCCO 2012 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

## Executive Summary

The constitution and other laws and policies protect religious freedom but, in practice, the government restricted religious freedom in some cases. The trend in the government's respect for religious freedom did not change significantly during the year. The constitution stipulates that Islam is the official state religion and designates the King as Commander of the Faithful (*'amir al-mu'mineen*) and Defender of the Community and the Faith (*hami hama al-milla wa ad-din*) in the country. The government continued to respect the right of the vast majority of citizens to practice their religion, although government policies discouraged conversion from Islam and prohibited efforts to proselytize Muslims. Non-Muslim foreign communities generally practiced their faith openly. The law permits Sunni Muslims of the Maliki school of Islam to proselytize, but it prohibits efforts to convert Sunnis of the Maliki School to other religions. Some Moroccan Christians reported decreased police harassment. The government continued to restrict the distribution of non-Islamic religious materials, as well as some Islamic materials that did not follow the Maliki school of Sunni Islam to which the monarchy adheres. Several small religious groups practiced with varying degrees of official restrictions. The government monitored the activities of religious groups and placed restrictions on individuals and groups when it deemed their actions exceeded the bounds of acceptable religious or political activity.

There were reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice, mainly involving converts from Islam to other religions. Christians continued to report societal scrutiny and pressure from non-Christian family and friends. Jews lived in safety throughout the country.

The U.S. ambassador and embassy staff discussed religious freedom with the government of Morocco within the context of official visits and a bilateral strategic dialogue.

## Section I. Religious Demography

The country's population is 32.3 million, according to U.S. government estimates. More than 99 percent is Sunni Muslim. Groups together constituting less than 1 percent of the population include Christians, Jews, Shia Muslims, and Bahais. According to Jewish community leaders, there are an estimated 3,000 to 4,000 Jews, approximately 2,500 of whom reside in Casablanca and are the remnants of a

## MOROCCO

much larger community that has mostly emigrated. The Rabat and Marrakesh Jewish communities each have about 100 members. The remainder of the Jewish population is dispersed throughout the country. That population is mostly elderly.

The predominantly Roman Catholic and Protestant foreign resident Christian community consists of approximately 5,000 practicing members, although some Protestant and Catholic clergy estimate the number to be as high as 25,000. Most foreign resident Christians live in the Casablanca, Tangier, and Rabat urban areas. Various local Christian leaders estimate that there are 4,000 citizen Christians (mostly ethnic Amazigh) who regularly attend “house” churches and live predominantly in the south. Some Christian leaders estimate that there may be as many as 8,000 Christian citizens throughout the country, but many reportedly do not meet regularly due to fear of government surveillance and social persecution.

The Catholic and French Protestant (referred to as l’Eglise evangelique du Maroc, or EEM) churches have buildings throughout many cities in the country. There are two Anglican churches located in Casablanca and Tangier. The Russian Orthodox Church holds services in a building in Rabat. The Greek Orthodox Church owns a building in Casablanca where it holds services. The Association Marocaine des Eglises Protestantes (AMEP) churches, a network of autonomous foreign resident Protestant church communities, generally rent or share buildings.

There are an estimated 3,000 to 8,000 Shia Muslims, most of them foreign residents from Lebanon or Iraq but including a few citizens. Followers of several Sufi Muslim orders across the Maghreb and West Africa undertake joint annual pilgrimages to the country. There are 350-400 Bahais, located in urban areas.

## Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

### Legal/Policy Framework

The constitution and other laws and policies protect religious freedom. The constitution stipulates that Islam is the official state religion, and designates the King as Commander of the Faithful (*‘amir al-mu’mineen*) and Defender of the Community and the Faith (*hami hama al-milla wa ad-din*) in the country.

All citizens, including members of parliament who are normally immune to arrest, may be prosecuted on charges of expressing opinions injurious to Islam. The law permits Sunni Muslims of the Maliki school to proselytize, but prohibits others from attempting to convert Sunni Muslims of the Maliki School to other religions.

## MOROCCO

The government tolerates several small religious groups with varying degrees of restrictions, but prohibits the distribution of non-Islamic religious materials. The government monitors the activities of mosques and of non-Muslim religious groups, and places some restrictions on members of religious groups when it deems their actions have exceeded the bounds of acceptable religious or political activity.

The Ministry of Endowments and Islamic Affairs (MEIA) provides guidance on and monitors Friday mosque sermons and the Quranic schools to prevent what the ministry considers inflammatory or extremist rhetoric and to ensure teaching follows approved doctrine. The government also monitors university campuses and religious activities, primarily those conducted by Islamists. At times, the authorities suppress the activities of politically active religious groups such as the banned yet tolerated al-Adl wa al-Ihsan (Justice and Charity Organization, or JCO), but generally tolerate activities limited to the propagation of Sunni Islam, education, and charity. The MEIA also tries to control the sale of extremist books, videotapes, and DVDs. The government requires that mosques close to the public shortly after daily prayer times to prevent use of the premises for unauthorized political activity. The government must authorize the construction of all new mosques, although mosques may be constructed using private funds. There are no known Shia mosques in the country.

The authorities frequently monitor registered foreign resident Christian church services and leadership meetings.

By law, impeding or preventing one or more persons from worship or from attending worship services of any religion may be punished by six months to three years of imprisonment and a fine of 115 to 575 dirhams (\$14 to \$68). The law applies the same penalty to “anyone who employs enticements to undermine the faith of a Muslim or to convert him to another religion.” It also provides the right to a court trial for anyone accused of such an offense.

The law permits the government to summarily expel any resident alien it determines to be “a threat to public order” even where other laws require due process first. The government has cited this law in the past to expel or refuse entry to foreign Christians accused of proselytizing.

Voluntary conversion is not a crime under the criminal or civil codes.

## MOROCCO

There is a separate set of laws and courts with authority over personal status matters for Jews covering issues such as marriage, inheritance, and other family matters. Rabbinical authorities, who are also court officials, administer Jewish family courts. Judges trained in the country's interpretation of Sharia (Islamic law) administer the courts for personal status matters for those of all other religious groups. However, Christians inherit according to civil law. There are no other legal mechanisms recognizing the Christian community (or other non-Muslims) in the same way the state recognizes its Jewish community. Non-Muslims must formally convert to Islam before they can become guardians of abandoned children. Pursuant to a 2012 Ministry of Justice circular, guardianship is restricted to qualified individuals who permanently reside in Morocco. According to the law, a Muslim man may marry a non-Muslim woman. However, a Muslim woman may not marry a non-Muslim man unless he converts to Islam.

A 2002 law restricting media freedom prohibits expression deemed critical of "Islam, the institution of the monarchy, or territorial integrity." Such expression may be punishable by imprisonment. The government does not otherwise restrict the print media or satellite and Internet programming.

By law, only the Supreme Council of Ulemas, a group appointed by the King with representatives from all regions of the country, may issue *fatwas* (scholarly religious decrees). A separate Brussels-based Council of Ulema provides religious guidance for the more than three million Moroccan citizens living abroad.

The MEIA employs over 500 chief imams and 200 female Muslim spiritual guides (*murshidat*), who provide guidance to women, young girls, and children in mosques, prisons, and charity homes. Each chief imam manages two urban or rural zones, each of which covers an average of 70 mosques.

Political parties founded on religious, ethnic, linguistic, or regional bases are prohibited by law. The government permits several parties identified as "Islamically-oriented," and some have attracted substantial support, including the Party of Justice and Development (PJD), which is the largest political party in the parliament and heads the coalition government.

The government does not recognize the JCO, an organization that rejects the King's spiritual authority. The JCO advocates for an Islamic state, continues to organize and participate in political demonstrations, and operates Internet sites, although the government does not allow public distribution of its published materials.

## MOROCCO

The government requires religious groups to register before they may undertake financial transactions or conduct other business as private associations and legal entities. Registered churches and associations include the Roman Catholic, Russian Orthodox, Greek Orthodox, French Protestant (referred to as l'Eglise evangelique du Maroc, or EEM), and Anglican churches. These churches existed before independence and operate within an officially recognized organization, the Conseil des Eglises chretiennes au Maroc (CECM). The Association Marocaine des Eglises Protestantes (AMEP) is a network of autonomous foreign resident Protestant church communities around the country, which are not part of the CECM. The government permits additional foreign resident churches to form under AMEP auspices.

The government provides tax benefits, land and building grants, subsidies, and customs exemptions for imports necessary for the religious activities of Muslims, Jews, and Christians.

The public assembly law states that any association that seeks to undermine Islam is invalid.

The government permits the display and sale of Bibles in French, English, and Spanish. A limited number of Arabic translations of the Bible are available for sale in select bookshops. However, authorities often confiscate Bibles they believe are intended for proselytizing. The government does not allow free public distribution of non-Muslim religious materials.

The government does not require the designation of religion on passports or national identity documents. There are no prohibitions on religious clothing or symbols in either the public or private sphere.

The government gives preferential treatment to Islam of the Maliki School and to Judaism. The government's annual education budget funds the teaching of Islam in all public schools and Judaism in some public schools. The government also funds the study of Jewish culture and its artistic, literary, and scientific heritage at some universities. At the University of Rabat, Hebrew and comparative religion are taught in the Department of Islamic Studies. Throughout the country, approximately a dozen professors teach Hebrew.

## MOROCCO

The MEIA continues to fund a graduate-level theological course, part of which focuses on Christianity and Judaism, and another course that trains both men and women to be counselors and teachers in mosques.

By law, all educational institutions may teach only Sunni Islam in accordance with the teachings of the Maliki School. These include international schools such as the French and Spanish schools. However, foreign-run schools have the option of not including any religious instruction within the school's curriculum.

The government observes the following religious holidays as national holidays: the Islamic New Year, the Birth of the Prophet Muhammad, Eid al-Fitr, and Eid al-Adha. Other religious groups observe their holy days without interference from government authorities.

### **Government Practices**

There were reports of abuses of religious freedom including temporary detention.

In March police arrested members of al Jamaa Mahdawiya, an Islamic sect led by Boumediene Khaouar, who claimed to be a messianic figure and have direct communication with the Prophet Muhammad. In April the authorities prosecuted eight members of the group on charges of fraud, belonging to an unauthorized association, holding unauthorized public meetings, and undermining the faith of Muslims. The court sentenced Khaouar to three years in prison, another group member to one year in prison, fined three members, and acquitted three others. The Oujda Court of Appeals upheld the rulings in December.

In March local authorities told the Assemblée Chretienne, a foreign resident church in Agadir, it could no longer meet at its building because of security concerns. Government officials claimed they were concerned that extremists in the neighborhood would target the church. A landlord had forced the church from its previous building in May 2011. The church was unable to find a landlord willing to rent a building, and the congregation began meeting at a hotel.

In September the Rabat Administrative Court heard the appeal of the legal status of the Village of Hope (VOH) orphanage in Ain Leuh. The authorities expelled the seven foreign resident families (including one American couple) who operated the VOH in March 2010 on charges of proselytizing. The government appointed a caretaker for the orphanage, but members of the VOH board appealed for the right to appoint a caretaker because the government had not dissolved its association.

## MOROCCO

Fears of government surveillance and laws restricting public gatherings led many local non-Muslim and non-Jewish groups to refrain from public worship; some meet discreetly in their members' homes.

Most foreigners attended religious services without restriction at places of worship belonging to officially recognized religious groups. The government did not take active measures to prevent Christian citizens from attending services in the recognized Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant churches. However, foreign resident Christian church officials reported that Moroccan Christians almost never attend their churches and that they did not encourage them to do so in order to avoid being accused of proselytizing.

The Ministry of Interior continued to monitor suspected proselytizing activities, especially those of Shia Muslims and Christians. In 2010 the government expelled and refused entry to foreign Christians whom it had accused of proselytizing, but there were no such cases reported during the year. Some Christian citizens alleged that authorities sought to contribute to societal prejudice and to entice Christian converts to renounce their faith by informing the converts' friends, relatives, and employers of the individuals' conversion.

The government continued the training of *murshidat* (women spiritual guides), a program begun in 2006 in part to promote tolerance and to increase women's spiritual participation. The government stated that their training is exactly the same as that required of male imams. However, the *murshidat* did not deliver Friday sermons in mosques or lead group prayers. They focused much of their work on meeting the various needs of other women. Since the inception of the program, more than 200 women have been trained and appointed to leadership positions in mosques and other societal institutions. They taught religious subjects, provided counsel on a variety of matters, including women's legal rights and family planning, and managed programs in which men participated.

Upon request, the government provided special protection to Jewish community members, visitors, and institutions, as well as to the foreign resident Christian community. Annual Jewish commemorations took place around the country, and Jewish visitors regularly visited religious sites. Members of the Jewish community were represented at high levels in the government, with one Jewish citizen serving as an advisor to the King and another as an ambassador at large for the King.

## MOROCCO

Some vendors at the annual government-sponsored book fair in Casablanca in February offered publications that were anti-Semitic. There was no indication that the government promoted these works.

### **Improvements and Positive Developments in Respect for Religious Freedom**

In March the government permitted the funeral of Shia cleric Abdallah Dadou, killed in a fire in Belgium, to take place in Tangier. The funeral was the first public Shia ceremony in the country in many 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 local Christians reported the government took no legal measures in response to continued societal scrutiny and harassment. Societal norms and pressure forced many non-Muslims and non-Jewish groups to practice their faiths quietly and discreetly.

Jewish citizens openly practiced their faith and lived in safety throughout the country. Muslim citizens studied at Christian and Jewish public and private schools. Muslim students constituted the majority at Jewish schools in Casablanca, and a hospital run by the Jewish community provided care to low-income citizens regardless of religion.

Many Muslim citizens characterized the Bahai faith as a heretical offshoot of Islam and consequently considered Bahais apostates. Most members of the Bahai community avoided disclosing their religious affiliation; however, concerns about their personal safety and property did not prevent their functioning in society, with some holding government jobs.

There was widespread consensus among Muslims in the country regarding religious practices and interpretation. However, some dissenters challenged the religious authority of the King and called for the establishment of a government more deeply rooted in their vision of Islam. The government views such dissent as political rather than religious in nature.

### **Section IV. U.S. Government Policy**

The U.S. embassy raised religious freedom with the government and spoke with regional authorities about the status of the Assemblée Chrétienne in Agadir. U.S.

## MOROCCO

government officials met with religious officials, including in the MEIA, and with other senior ministry officials, as well as with Muslim religious scholars, leaders of the Jewish community, Christian foreign residents, the leaders of registered and unregistered Christian groups, and other local religious groups, including Muslim minority groups, to promote religious freedom. Through a bilateral strategic dialogue, the U.S. and Morocco decided to explore further cooperation to promote understanding and interfaith dialogue. The U.S. government sponsored programs focusing on religious tolerance and freedom using the United States as a model. During Ramadan, the embassy organized several events to promote religious dialogue and emphasize religious tolerance. Embassy-funded speakers promoted moderate Islam and interfaith dialogue.