

# MOROCCO 2015 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

## Executive Summary

The constitution declares the country to be a sovereign Muslim state and Islam to be the religion of the state. The constitution guarantees freedom of thought, expression, and assembly, and says the state guarantees the free exercise of beliefs to everyone. The constitution states the king is the protector of Islam and the guarantor of freedom of worship. It prohibits political parties, parliamentarians, and constitutional amendments from infringing upon Islam. The criminal code prohibits the use of “enticements” by non-Muslims to try to convert Muslims to another religion. The minister of justice reaffirmed the freedom to change religions as long as no coercion was involved, but said Christian evangelism remained prohibited because missionaries had offered material inducements to the poor to convert them. The government reportedly detained and questioned Moroccan Christians about their beliefs and contacts with other Moroccan Christians, including incidents in Rabat and Fes. The government also continued to deny registration to local Christian, Shia, and Bahai groups. Representatives of minority religious groups said fears of government surveillance led adherents of the Christian, Bahai, and Shia faiths to refrain from public worship and instead to meet discreetly in members’ homes. The government allowed foreign Christian communities to attend worship services in approved locations. The Ministry of Endowments and Islamic Affairs (MEIA) continued to control the content of sermons in mosques, Islamic religious education, and the dissemination of Islamic religious material by the broadcast media. The government continued to restrict the distribution of non-Islamic religious materials, as well as Islamic materials it deemed inconsistent with the Maliki-Ashari school of Sunni Islam. The government arrested several individuals for eating in public during Ramadan.

Although Jews said they continued to live and worship in safety, participants in a pro-Palestinian rally in Casablanca in October staged a mock execution of individuals dressed as Hasidic Jews. Christians reported pressure to convert from non-Christian family and friends. Two Muslim actors received death threats for appearing in a U.S.-made movie about the life of Jesus. Members of the Shia community said in some areas they were able to practice their faith openly, but most members of the community practiced discreetly. Bahais reportedly practiced their faith discreetly and avoided disclosing their religious affiliation.

The U.S. Ambassador, embassy and consulate general officers, and other U.S. government officials discussed religious tolerance with the government in the

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context of official visits and the bilateral strategic dialogue. The Ambassador and embassy officers met with Muslim religious scholars and leaders of the Jewish and Christian communities to promote interfaith dialogue.

### **Section I. Religious Demography**

The U.S. government estimates the population at 33.3 million (July 2015 estimate) and estimates more than 99 percent of the population 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. The Rabat and Marrakech Jewish communities each have approximately 100 members.

Moroccan and foreign resident Christian leaders estimate there are between 2,000 to 6,000 Moroccan Christians distributed throughout the country, although some leaders state there may be as many as 50,000. These Christian leaders estimate out of the total number of Moroccan Christians, there are 1,000 to 3,000 who regularly attend “house” churches.

Foreign resident Christian leaders estimate the foreign resident Christian population includes at least 30,000 Roman Catholics and 10,000 Protestants. The foreign resident Protestant community includes the French Evangelical Church of Morocco (known by its French acronym EEM), the Moroccan Association of Protestant Churches (AMEP), and Anglican churches in Casablanca and Tangier. There is a small foreign resident Russian Orthodox community in Rabat, and a small foreign resident Greek Orthodox community in Casablanca. Most foreign resident Christians live in the Casablanca, Tangier, and Rabat urban areas, but foreign Christians are present throughout the country in smaller numbers. Many foreign resident Christians are migrants from sub-Saharan Africa.

Shia Muslim leaders estimate there are tens of thousands of Shia, with the largest numbers in the north. In addition, there is an estimated one to two thousand foreign resident Shia from Lebanon, Syria, or Iraq. There are 350 – 400 Bahais in urban areas, particularly in Tangier.

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

#### **Legal Framework**

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According to the constitution, the country is a sovereign Muslim state and Islam is the religion of the state. The constitution guarantees the freedom of thought, expression, and assembly, and says the state “guarantees to all the free exercise of beliefs.” The constitution states the king holds the Islamic title of commander of the faithful, is the protector of Islam, and is the guarantor of freedom of worship in the country. The constitution prohibits the enactment of laws or constitutional amendments infringing upon its provisions relating to Islam.

The criminal code prohibits attempts by non-Muslims to “shake the faith” of citizens from the Maliki-Ashari school of Islam, and punishes anyone who “employs enticements” to undermine the faith of a Muslim or to convert a Muslim to another religion with six months to three years’ imprisonment and a fine of 200 to 500 dirhams (\$20 to \$50). It also provides the right to a court trial for anyone accused of such an offense. Voluntary conversion is not a crime under the criminal or civil codes.

The constitution and the law governing the media sector prohibit any citizen, including members of parliament normally immune from arrest, from criticizing Islam. Such expressions are punishable by imprisonment for three to five years and a fine of 10,000 to 100,000 dirhams (\$1,000 to \$10,000).

The law grants recognition to Sunni Maliki-Ashari Muslims and Jews as native populations free to practice their religion without any specific requirements to register with the government. The law requires religious groups not recognized as native, which includes non-Maliki-Ashari Muslims (e.g., Shia) and Christians, among others, to register before they are able to undertake financial transactions or conduct other business as private associations and legal entities.

The registration requirements for nonrecognized groups are the same as for all other associations, which must register with local Ministry of Interior officials in the jurisdiction of the association’s headquarters. The registration application must contain the name and purpose of the association; the name, nationality, age, profession, and residence of its founders; and the address of the association’s headquarters. The constitution guarantees civil society associations and nongovernmental organizations the right to constitute themselves and exercise their activities freely within the scope of the constitution. The law on associations prohibits organizations which pursue activities the government regards as “illegal, contrary to good morals, or aimed at undermining the Islamic religion, the integrity

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of the national territory, or the monarchical regime, or which call for discrimination.”

Registered churches and associations include the Roman Catholic, Russian Orthodox, Greek Orthodox, French Protestant, and Anglican Churches, whose existence as foreign resident Churches predates the country’s independence in 1956 and which operate within the officially registered Council of Christian Churches of Morocco (CECM).

Legal provisions provide tax benefits, land and building grants, subsidies, and customs exemptions for imports necessary for the religious activities of recognized religious groups (Sunni Muslims and Jews) and registered religious groups, such as foreign resident Christian groups.

By law, impeding or preventing one or more persons from worshipping or from attending worship services of any religion is punishable by six months to three years of imprisonment and a fine of 200 to 500 dirhams (\$20 to \$50).

The penal code states any person known to be Muslim who breaks the fast in public during the month of Ramadan without an exception granted by religious authorities is liable for punishment of six months in prison and a fine of 200 to 500 dirhams (\$20 to \$50).

The High Authority for Audiovisual Communications established by the constitution requires all eight television stations to dedicate 5 percent of their airtime to Islamic religious content. It requires all public channels to broadcast the Islamic call to prayer five times daily.

By law, all educational institutions must teach Sunni Islam in accordance with the teachings of the Maliki-Ashari school. The government’s annual education budget funds the teaching of Islam in all public schools. Foreign-run schools, such as the French and Spanish schools, have the choice of teaching Sunni Islam or of not including any religious instruction within the school’s curriculum. Private Jewish schools are able to teach Judaism.

According to the constitution, only the High Council of Ulema, a group headed and appointed by the king with representatives from all regions of the country, may issue scholarly fatwas, which become binding only through endorsement by the king in a royal decree.

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A separate set of laws and courts govern certain civil matters for Jews, including functions such as marriage, inheritance, and other family matters. Rabbinical authorities, who are also court officials, administer Jewish family courts. Muslim judges trained in the country's interpretation of sharia administer the courts for personal status matters for all other religious groups.

According to the law, a Muslim man may marry a non-Muslim woman, but a Muslim woman may not marry a non-Muslim man unless he converts to Islam. Non-Muslims must formally convert to Islam and be a permanent resident before they can become guardians of abandoned or orphaned children. Guardianship entails the caretaking of a child, which may last until the child reaches 18 years, but does not provide for changing the child's name or inheritance, and requires the child's religion not be changed, according to orphanage directors.

According to the constitution, political parties may not be based on religion and may not seek "infringement" of Islam as one of their objectives.

The law permits the government to expel summarily any noncitizen resident it determines to be "a threat to public order," even where other laws require due process first.

### **Government Practices**

The government reportedly arrested, detained, and questioned Moroccan Christians about their beliefs and contacts with other Christians. The government reaffirmed its policy opposing efforts to convert Muslims to Christianity and continued to restrict the distribution of non-Islamic religious materials, as well as some Islamic materials it deemed inconsistent with the Maliki-Ashari school of Sunni Islam. The authorities arrested and sentenced several individuals for eating in public during the Ramadan fast. Government institutions, such as the MEIA and security services, monitored and, in some cases, restricted religious activities of Muslims and non-Muslims.

Local media reported in July authorities in Rabat had arrested a Moroccan Christian along with a foreign friend. The Moroccan stated the foreigner was quickly released but the police confiscated the Moroccan's mobile phone and detained him for more than 24 hours, during which time they beat him and questioned him about his religious beliefs.

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According to Moroccan Christian leaders, in January the police in Fes arrested a 22-year-old in possession of a Bible and reportedly held him for 10 hours of questioning regarding his religious beliefs and his contact with other Moroccan Christians. He stated he was not given food or water during this period.

Human rights groups reported authorities in July had arrested five people in Marrakech for eating and drinking in public during fasting hours. They were sentenced to two months in jail. Also in July a court in al-Hoceima sentenced two citizens to two-month jail terms for eating in public during fasting hours.

In July the minister of justice stated citizens were free to change their religion and no Moroccan law punished anyone for changing his/her religion. He made reference to two cases of Muslim citizens converting to Christianity who he said had not been punished. He stated he had intervened in one of the cases, ordering the prosecutor general to set free the detained convert after ascertaining the conversion did not entail coercion or material inducements. He further stated criminal law would not apply in conversions to Christianity or atheism unless coercion was involved. While the law allowed the Maliki-Ashari Muslims to proselytize, the minister said the law criminalized Christian evangelism because the majority of missionaries had offered inducements to poor families and children to convert to Christianity.

The government continued to allow the operation of registered foreign resident Protestant churches not falling under the CECM but formed under the auspices of AMEP. The governments also continued its policy of not recognizing local Christian, Bahai, or Shia religious groups, and not allowing them to register as religious organizations, which religious leaders and legal scholars said prevented those groups from legally gathering for religious ceremonies or forming associations under which they could operate legally.

In August a Shia group stated the government had denied its request to register as an association, although it had obtained a commercial license to operate its publishing house. According to representatives of the Shia group, government authorities denied their registration because the authorities claimed it would set a precedent and allow other minority religious groups to establish themselves. In March the Ministry of Interior denied reports it had authorized a Shia group to open a publishing house in Tangier.

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Although the government continued to ban the Justice and Charity Organization (JCO) because of its longstanding rejection of the preeminence of the king's spiritual authority, the government reportedly tolerated some of its activities while suppressing others. The JCO continued to be able to participate in political demonstrations, hold small conferences, release press statements, and manage internet sites, although the government occasionally prevented the organization from meeting and restricted public distribution of the JCO's published materials.

The MEIA remained the principal government institution responsible for shaping the country's religious sphere and promoting its interpretation of Sunni Islam. The MEIA continued to provide training and direction to imams and to monitor Friday mosque sermons and Quranic schools to prevent what the ministry considered to be inflammatory or extremist rhetoric and to ensure teaching followed approved doctrine. The government continued to require mosques to close to the public shortly after daily prayer times to prevent use of the premises for what it termed unauthorized activity.

The MEIA continued to employ more than 500 chief imams and more than 200 female Muslim spiritual guides (*murshidat*) in mosques or religious institutions throughout the country. The female guides taught religious subjects and provided counsel on a variety of matters, including women's legal rights and family planning.

Adherents of the Moroccan Christian, Bahai and Shia faiths said fears of government surveillance led them to refrain from public worship and instead to meet discreetly in members' homes. Foreign resident Christian church officials reported Moroccan Christians rarely attended their churches, and the officials did not encourage them to do so to avoid accusations of proselytizing. Moroccan Christians stated the authorities made phone or house calls several times a year to demonstrate they had lists of members of Christian networks and monitored Christian activities. Some Moroccan Christians reported authorities pressured Christian converts to renounce their faith by informing the converts' friends, relatives, and employers of the individuals' conversion. Christians also reported the government did not respond to complaints about continued societal harassment. Foreigners attended religious services without restriction at places of worship belonging to officially recognized Catholic, Orthodox, or Protestant Churches.

According to media reports, in May a court in Agadir refused to issue a marriage license to a Moroccan man and his German, Christian fiancée on the grounds they

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belonged to a “satanic cult.” The media stated the judge based his decision on a report the man had renounced his religion (Islam) in 2008.

In December the media reported a Moroccan Christian group sent an open letter to the king asking for permission to celebrate Christmas and other Christian rites, and for an end to restrictions on their religious practice. According to some Moroccan Christians, palace officials had not responded to the request as of year’s end.

The government continued to restrict the distribution of non-Islamic religious materials, as well as some Islamic materials it deemed inconsistent with the Maliki-Ashari school of Sunni Islam. Its policy remained to try to control the sale of all books, videotapes, and DVDs it considered to be extremist.

The government continued to permit the display and sale of Bibles in French, English, and Spanish. A limited number of Arabic translations of the Bible were available for sale in a few bookshops for use in university religion courses. Authorities confiscated Bibles they believed were intended for use in proselytizing.

The government continued to disseminate information about Islam over dedicated state-funded Quranic television and radio channels. The television channel Assadissa (Sixth) continued programming consisting primarily of Quran and *hadith* (traditional teachings) readings and exegesis, highlighting the government’s interpretation of Islam.

The monarchy continued to support the rehabilitation of synagogues and restoration of Jewish cemeteries throughout the country, efforts it stated it deemed necessary to preserve the country’s religious and cultural heritage and to serve as a symbol of tolerance.

The construction of new mosques, including those constructed using private funds, continued to require authorization from the MEIA. The authorization of the Ministry of Interior continued to be a requirement for the renovation or construction of churches.

The government continued to fund the study of Jewish culture and heritage at universities. At the University of Rabat, Hebrew and comparative religion were course offerings in the Department of Islamic Studies. Jews and Moroccan Christians stated elementary and high school curricula continued not to mention the historical legacy and current presence of their groups in the country, however.



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In March the king inaugurated a new royal regional imam training institute as part of a royal initiative which government officials said was designed to promote openness and tolerance among the new generation of male and female Muslim religious guides, including Moroccan, West African, and French students. Al Akhawayn University in Ifrane, a royally sponsored university, continued to offer an advanced degree in Islamic studies with an emphasis in comparative religion to MEIA-nominated imams and others.

The government continued to permit several parties identified as “Islamically oriented” rather than Islamist, including the Party of Justice and Development (PJD), which remained the largest political party in parliament.

Jews continued to serve in two high-level government positions – one as a royal advisor and one as an ambassador-at-large.

According to observers, the government tolerated social and charity activities consistent with its view of Sunni Islam. For example, the Unity and Reform Movement, which shares some leadership with the PJD and is the country’s largest legally recognized Islamist social organization, continued to operate without restrictions according to media reports.

### **Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom**

In October participants in a pro-Palestinian rally in Casablanca reportedly acted out a scene in which individuals in Palestinian dress pushed fake rifles into the backs of other individuals in handcuffs dressed as Hasidic Jews, and then play-acted the execution of those portraying the Jews. Local authorities later briefly detained and questioned the individuals involved in the play-acting scene, but no charges were filed.

According to media reports, in January two Muslim actors who had appeared in a U.S.-made movie filmed in country about the life of Jesus, received death threats over the phone and on social media accusing the actors of apostasy. The actors said they had participated in the film to make money and not because of a change in their religious beliefs.

Christians reported pressure to convert to Islam or renounce the Christian faith from non-Christian family and friends. Moroccan Christian leaders said young

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Christians who still lived with their Muslim families did not reveal their faith to their families because they were likely to be expelled from their homes unless they renounced Christianity.

Non-Maliki-Ashari Muslims said fear of societal harassment added to their concern over the government's surveillance as grounds for continuing to practice their faiths discreetly. According to media reports, members of the Bahai community continued to avoid disclosing their religious affiliation because the country's Muslims considered the Bahai Faith to be a heretical deviation from Islam and its adherents to be apostates. There were no known Bahai houses of worship. Shia Muslims said in some areas, particularly in large cities in the north, they did not hide their faith from family, friends, or neighbors, but many continued to avoid disclosing their religious affiliation in areas where their numbers were smaller. There were no known Shia mosques.

The leader of a Shia group in August announced he had founded an observatory for human rights to track cases of discrimination based on religion.

Jewish citizens said they continued to live and attend services at synagogues in safety. They said they continued to visit religious sites regularly and to hold annual commemorations.

Muslim citizens continued to study at private Christian and public and private Jewish schools. According to local Jewish leaders, Muslim students constituted a significant portion of the students at Jewish schools in Casablanca.

The media continued to report women had difficulties in finding employment in the private sector, or with the army or police, if they wore a hijab. When they did obtain employment in those sectors, the women reported employers either encouraged or required them to remove their headscarves during working hours.

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

The U.S. government promoted religious tolerance in the bilateral strategic dialogue. The Ambassador, embassy and consulate general officers, and visiting U.S. government officials met with senior government officials, including the minister of endowments and Islamic affairs, to discuss tolerance of minority religions.

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The Ambassador and embassy officers also met with Muslim religious scholars, leaders of the Jewish community, prominent Christian visitors, Christian foreign residents, leaders of registered and unregistered Christian groups, and other local religious groups to promote religious dialogue.