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Jordan

BUREAU OF DEMOCRACY, HUMAN RIGHTS, AND LABOR

July-December, 2010 International Religious Freedom Report

Report

September 13, 2011

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 kingdom, unless they violate public order or morality. The constitution notes that the state religion is Islam and that the king must be Muslim; 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's application of Sharia infringes upon the religious rights and freedoms laid out in the constitution by prohibiting conversion from Islam and discriminating against religious minorities in some matters relating to family law. Members of unrecognized religious groups also face legal discrimination.

The status of respect for religious freedom by the government was unchanged during the reporting period. The government continued to monitor some citizens and resident foreign groups suspected of proselytizing Muslims and a few Muslim converts to Christianity, as well as monitor members of the Bahai Faith. In the case of converts, this sometimes included attempts to induce them to revert back to Islam. The Sharia court, which has family law jurisdiction for Muslims, continued apostasy proceedings against a convert from Islam. Conversion from Islam is not permitted under Islamic law, and any such converts risk the loss of civil rights. Security services increased non-intrusive monitoring of Christian churches and leaders for security reasons; this was generally welcomed by Christians.

While relations between Muslims and Christians generally were peaceful, adherents of unrecognized religions and Muslims who converted to other religions faced societal discrimination and the threat of mental and physical abuse by their families, government officials, and at times community members.

The ambassador and other U.S. government officials discussed religious freedom with the government as part of active and ongoing efforts to promote human rights. In addition the embassy supported a number of exchange and outreach programs that facilitated religious tolerance.

Section I. Religious Demography

The country has an area of 35,637 square miles and a population of 6.3 million, around 95 percent of whom are Sunni Muslim. Estimates of the number of Christian citizens vary from 1.5 to 3 percent of the population. Shia Muslims, Bahai, and Druze constitute an estimated 2 percent of the population. There are no available statistics regarding the number of persons who are not adherents of any religious faith.

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 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 United Pentecostal and Jehovah's Witnesses. There are Chaldean and Syriac Christians among the Iraqi refugee population, referred to as "guests" by the government. The Baptist Church is registered as a "denomination," but does not enjoy the full privileges of other registered denominations in the country.

As of November 30, 2010, approximately 31,000 Iraqis residing in the country were registered with the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) as refugees or asylum seekers. Of those registered with the UNHCR, 66 percent are Sunni Muslim, 24 percent Shia Muslim, 8 percent Christian, and 2 percent other religious groups.

With few exceptions there are no major geographic concentrations of religious minorities. The cities of Husn, in the north, and Fuheis, near Amman, are predominantly Christian. Madaba and Karak, both south of Amman, also have significant Christian populations. The northern part of the city of Azraq has a sizeable Druze community. There also are Druze populations in Amman and Zarqa. There are some nonindigenous Shia living in the Jordan Valley and in the south.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

Please refer to Appendix C in the *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices* for the status of the government's acceptance of international legal standards <http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/hrrpt/2010/appendices/index.htm>.

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 kingdom, unless they violate public order or morality. The constitution further stipulates that there shall be no discrimination in the rights and duties of citizens on grounds of religion; however, the constitution also notes that the state religion is Islam and the king must be Muslim.

Neither the constitution, the penal code, nor civil legislation bans conversion from Islam or efforts to proselytize Muslims. However, the government prohibits conversion from Islam in that it accords primacy to Islamic law, which governs Muslims personal status and prohibits them from converting. This practice contradicts the constitution's religious freedom provisions and hinders the country from meeting its commitments as a signatory of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. The government freely allows conversion to Islam and 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; rather, converts from Islam are still considered Muslims. In general, under Islamic law, these converts are regarded as apostates, and any member of society may file an apostasy complaint against them. In cases decided by an Islamic law court, judges have annulled converts' marriages, transferred child custody to a non-parent Muslim family member, conveyed an individual's property rights to

Muslim family members, deprived individuals of many civil rights, and declared non-Muslim minors as "wards of the state" and without any religious identity.

The constitution also provides that matters concerning personal status, such as 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 is recognized by the government are under the jurisdiction of denomination-specific Tribunals of Religious Communities, as outlined in the constitution. During the reporting period there were three tribunals, one each for Catholics, Greek Orthodox, and Anglicans, which oversaw their denominations' respective religious courts. Members of Protestant denominations registered as "societies" must use the recognized Anglican tribunal. There are no tribunals for atheists or adherents of unrecognized religions such as the Bahai Faith. Such individuals must request one of the recognized courts to hear their personal status cases. There is no legal provision for civil marriage or divorce. Members of religious groups that have no legally recognized religious divorce sometimes converted to another Christian denomination or to Islam in order to divorce legally.

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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. 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 head of the department that manages Islamic law court affairs (a cabinet-level position) appoints Islamic law judges, while each recognized non-Muslim religious community selects the structure and members of its own tribunal. All judicial nominations must be approved by the prime minister and commissioned officially by royal decree.

On January 21, 2009, the cabinet officially recognized the Council of Church Leaders as the government's advisory body for all Christian affairs. The council consists of the heads of the 11 officially recognized Christian churches in the country and serves as an administrative body to facilitate official Christian matters, including the issuance of work permits, land permits, and marriage and birth certificates, in coordination with government ministries, departments, and institutions. Unrecognized Christian denominations, despite not having full membership on the council, must also conduct business with the government through the council. During the reporting period, concerns continued over the council's capacity to manage all Christian affairs effectively and fairly.

Christians served regularly as cabinet ministers, and in November 2010 the king appointed six Christians to the upper house of parliament. Of the 120 seats of the lower house of parliament, nine are reserved for Christians. Christians are prohibited from running outside of these designated seats. No seats are reserved for adherents of other minority religious groups. The government classification of Druze as Muslims permitted them to hold office.

The government traditionally reserves some positions in the upper levels of the military for Christians (4 percent); however, all senior command positions were held by Muslims. Division-level commanders and above were required to lead Islamic prayer on certain occasions. While there were only Sunni Muslim chaplains in the armed forces, Christian and Shia Muslim members of the armed forces were not prohibited from practicing 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). At times jail sentences have been imposed for infractions to the law.

Religious institutions must be accorded official recognition through application to the prime minister's office to own land and administer sacraments, including marriage. This requirement would also apply to schools administered by religious institutions. 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.

There were no reports of banned religious groups during the reporting period, although some groups remain officially unrecognized.

The Ministry of Religious Affairs and Awqaf (religious endowments) manages Islamic institutions and the construction of mosques. It also appoints imams, provides mosque staff salaries, manages Islamic clergy training centers, and subsidizes certain activities sponsored by mosques. The government monitored sermons at mosques and required that preachers refrain from political commentary that the government believed could instigate social or political unrest. Imams who violated these rules faced fines and a possible ban from preaching.

Recognized non-Islamic religious institutions do not receive subsidies; they are financially and administratively independent of the government and are tax-exempt. Groups registered as "societies" rather than denominations are subject to the 2008 Law on Associations that requires government approval of a group's budget, approval of foreign funding, and notification of the group's by-laws and board members in addition to other administrative restrictions. The Free Evangelical Church, the Church of the Nazarene, the Assemblies of God, and the Christian and Missionary Alliance are registered with the Ministry of Justice (MOJ) as "societies" and were subject to the law's restrictions. The government denied approval for public meetings for some groups registered as societies during the reporting period. Groups registered as "churches" with the MOJ and the Baptist Church, which is registered as a "denomination" with the Ministry of Interior, were not subject to the Associations Law.

Although the government does not recognize the Druze religion, it does not prohibit its practice. The Druze did not report official discrimination. 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 Bahai Faith is likewise unrecognized by the government, 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 action 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. The Department of Civil Status and Passports does not officially recognize marriages conducted by Bahai assemblies, but it does acknowledge these marriages for the purpose of updating personal information in passports. 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 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.

Public schools provided Islamic religious instruction as part of the basic national curriculum, although Christian students were allowed to leave the classroom during these sessions. However, Christian students in private and public schools must learn verses from the Qur'an and Islamic poetry in both Arabic and social studies classes in preparation for mid-year and end-of-year exams written by the Ministry of Education. The constitution provided 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 operated private schools that were open to adherents of all religions, such as the Baptist, Orthodox, and Latin schools, and they were able to teach Christian ideology.

Employment applications for government positions occasionally contained 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, the Prophet's Ascension, Eid al-Fitr, Eid al-Adha, the Islamic New Year, Christmas, and the Gregorian calendar New Year. Christians are traditionally given leave from work on Christian holidays approved by the Council of Church Leaders, such as Palm Sunday and Easter.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

There were no reports that the practice of any faith was prohibited, but some government actions impeded the activities of some Muslim and non-Muslim groups. Some religious groups, while allowed to meet and practice their faith, faced official discrimination. In addition not all Christian denominations have been accorded legal recognition.

Some Bahai children continued to face difficulty in obtaining birth certificates, which are required to register for school and to receive citizenship. In 2007 the Department of Civil Status and Passports changed the religion on the identification card of a female Bahai, who is married to a Bahai man, to Islam after discovering that the grand mufti issued a fatwa (Islamic religious ruling) in the 1970s stating her father's conversion to the Bahai Faith was illegal. Since government policy, following Islamic law, forbids a Muslim woman to marry a non-Muslim man, her husband would have to convert to Islam for them to obtain a legally recognized marriage certificate. Because the couple did not have one, the department continued to refuse the issuance of a birth certificate to their child unless the father converted to Islam before the Islamic law court or omitted his name from the birth certificate, making the child illegitimate.

During the reporting period, churchgoers continued to note the presence of security officers in civilian clothes outside churches of some Christian denominations. Church leaders stated that security officials have stepped up their monitoring of church services, but characterized this as an attempt to provide better protection following threats against Christian groups in the region. Some religious leaders also reported being summoned by the security services for questioning on their church's activities and church membership, though most characterized these encounters as civil.

Fewer religious leaders reported the sporadic denial of visas to foreign adherents coming to the country to attend workshops and conferences than during the previous reporting period. Religious leaders reported that they and other congregants were sometimes questioned by the security services during travel in and out of the country, including occasional attempts to convert them to Islam. There were also anecdotal reports among the Iraqi refugee community of similar questioning by security services.

Abuses of Religious Freedom

There were reports of abuses of religious freedom in the country.

In 2009 a court charged a literary figure with defamation of Islam, sentencing him to fines and time in jail. At the end of 2010, he was free on bail pending an appeal of the court's ruling. The court had not responded to his appeal by the end of the reporting period.

In 2010 an apostasy case was brought to the Amman Islamic law court by the brother of a citizen who converted from Islam to the Bahai Faith. The case was initiated in March 2007. The 56-year-old defendant converted when he was 19, so there appeared to be no statute of limitations. The case was postponed on several occasions in 2009 and 2010 because both the convert and the witnesses failed to appear.

During the reporting period, a few converts from Islam to Christianity reported being summoned and questioned by security service officers after family members complained to authorities about the conversion. Security service personnel reportedly questioned their beliefs, threatened court and other actions, and offered rewards to them for denouncing the conversion, such as 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 told employers to fire them.

On April 22, 2008, the Sweilih Islamic law court found Muhammad Abbad Abbad, a convert from Islam to Christianity, guilty of apostasy, annulled his marriage, and declared him to be without any religious identity. In March 2008 Abbad reportedly was taken to the Sweilih Islamic court without legal representation on charges of apostasy. Accused of "contempt of court" and sentenced to one week's imprisonment, Abbad and his family departed the country. The government issued arrest warrants after their departure. At the end of the reporting period, the family remained outside the country.

In late 2007 and early 2008, approximately 30 foreign resident members of evangelical churches, many of whom were longtime residents of the country, were deported, refused renewal of residency permits, or denied re-entry after exiting the country. The government cited as the reasons for these decisions concern for the evangelicals' personal safety, violation of immigration regulations, and unspecified unlawful actions while in the country. Some of the evangelicals were questioned and detained without charge by security service officials before deportation. The government permitted four of the evangelicals to return to the country in 2008. These evangelicals retained residency in the country throughout the reporting period.

In February 2008 the Council of Church Leaders responded to a Western media report criticizing the government for religious freedom violations that included the expulsion of missionaries. The council's declaration supported the government's decision to deport or deny residency permits to approximately 30 foreign evangelical Christians. Local daily newspapers reported extensively and critically on the declaration, including accusations of conducting illegal missionary work. Local evangelical church leaders attempted to publish a response to the letter but were allegedly denied permission by the dailies' editors-in-chief, although one response appeared on a local news website. Parliament endorsed the declaration, and it appeared on a Jordanian embassy Web site.

There were no reports of religious prisoners or detainees in the country.

Section III. Status of Societal Actions Affecting Enjoyment of Religious Freedom

Some religious groups, such as the Bahais, while allowed to meet and practice their faith, faced some societal discrimination. Iraqi Sabeian Mandaean refugees – officially accorded the status of "guests" in the country – reported facing extreme societal discrimination and pressure to convert to Islam in the form of harassment and physical threats.

This discrimination greatly limited their ability to perform religious rites and attend schools. Their religion was not officially recognized by the government, but they have received limited police protection when performing baptism rituals.

Some Muslims who converted to other religions reported facing social ostracism, threats, and physical and verbal abuse from their families and Muslim religious leaders. In recent years some family members of converts have filed apostasy charges against them in Islamic law courts, which have led to convictions depriving them of civil rights, including annulment of their marriage contracts and loss of custody of their children. Citizens reported that interfaith romantic relationships have led to ostracism and, in some cases, feuds between members of the couple's families and violence toward the individuals.

The media, editorial cartoons, articles, and opinion pieces sometimes conflated anti-Israel sentiment with anti-Semitic sentiment, depicting negative images of Jews without public government response.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. government promotes religious freedom with the government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights. The ambassador and other embassy officials raised religious freedom issues with government authorities on many occasions through formal inquiries and discussions with both working-level contacts and high-ranking officials. Embassy officers 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 August and September 2010, the embassy held a series of speakers and movie screenings for university students about Ramadan celebrations in the United States. The movies showcased iftars and community service projects involving members of multiple faiths.

In September 2010 the embassy hosted a video conference with Diana Eck, author of *A New Religious America: How a "Christian Country" Has Become the World's Most Religiously Diverse Nation*. The event included a panel discussion with Jordanian professors and religious leaders on Muslim-Christian relations. Attendees included university professors, students, and religious figures.

The embassy facilitated a visit to Jordan of American Imam Bashar Arafat in November 2010. Imam Arafat spoke with Muslim audiences about interfaith relations, as well as appeared on Jordanian television with a local Christian leader.

In December 2010 the Embassy hosted Appalachian State University professor Curtis Ryan, who spoke on "Teaching Islam in the West" at Jordan's World Islamic Sciences and Education University. His talks included a panel discussion with religious leaders on local Muslim-Christian relations.

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