



[Home](#) » [Under Secretary for Democracy and Global Affairs](#) » [Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor](#) » [Releases](#) » [International Religious Freedom](#) » [2010 Report on International Religious Freedom](#) » [Near East and North Africa](#) » [Jordan](#)

Jordan

BUREAU OF DEMOCRACY, HUMAN RIGHTS, AND LABOR

International Religious Freedom Report 2010

November 17, 2010

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 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 Shari'a (Islamic law) 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 harass some citizens and resident foreign groups suspected of proselytizing Muslims and a few Muslim converts to Christianity, including by attempting to induce them to revert to Islam; but the intensity of the harassment declined during the reporting period. The Islamic law 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.

While relations between Muslims and Christians generally were good, adherents of unrecognized religions and Muslims who converted to other religions faced societal discrimination and the threat of mental and physical abuse.

The ambassador and other U.S. government officials discussed religious freedom with the government as part of active, 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. Shi'a Muslims, Baha'i, and Druze are 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 April 30, 2010, approximately 32,000 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, 61 percent are Sunni Muslim, 25 percent Shi'a Muslim, 11 percent Christian, and 3 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 a number of nonindigenous Shi'a living in the Jordan Valley and in the south.

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 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 the country's ratification of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR). 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. Under Islamic law these converts are regarded as apostates and may be denied their civil rights if any member of society files an apostasy complaint against them. In cases decided by an Islamic law court, judges have annulled converts' marriages, transferred child custody to a Muslim family member, conveyed their property rights to Muslim family members, deprived them of many civil rights, and declared them "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. For Muslims these are the Islamic law courts, which apply Islamic law in their proceedings following the guidelines of the Hanafi school of Islamic jurisprudence in cases that are not 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 Tribunals of Religious Communities, as outlined in the constitution. Adherents to unrecognized religions must request one of the religious 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.

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.

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In June 2006 the government, through publication in the Official Gazette, enacted the ICCPR, which the country ratified without reservations in 1976. International covenants published in the Official Gazette possess the force of law but, according to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, are subservient to the constitution if discrepancies exist. The ICCPR states that everyone shall have the "right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion," including freedom to have or to adopt a religion or belief of his choice, and freedom "to manifest his religion or belief in worship, observance, practice, and teaching." Additionally, the ICCPR stipulates that no one shall be subject to coercion that would impair his freedom to have or to adopt a religion or belief of his choice. However, the constitution provides that matters concerning the personal status of Muslims, including religion, are the exclusive jurisdiction of Islamic law courts, which have always ruled to deny Muslims the freedom to adopt a different religion or belief.

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. Members of Protestant denominations registered as "societies" must use one of the recognized Protestant church tribunals. There are no tribunals for atheists or adherents of unrecognized religions such as the Baha'i Faith. Such individuals must request one of the recognized courts to hear their personal status cases.

On January 21, 2009, the cabinet officially recognized the Council of Church Leaders as the government's reference point 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. As of the end of the reporting period, concerns continued over the council's human resources capacity to manage all Christian affairs effectively and fairly.

Christians served regularly as cabinet ministers, and in December 2009 the king appointed four Christians to the upper house of parliament. Of the 110 seats of the lower house of parliament, nine are reserved for Christians; the number of reserved Christian seats remained unchanged under the government's May 2010 Temporary Elections Law that increased the total number of seats to 120. No seats are reserved for adherents of other 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 Shi'a Muslim members of the armed forces were not prohibited from practicing their religion.

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 on Christian holidays approved by the Council of Church Leaders, such as Palm Sunday and Easter.

The amended 1998 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 \$28,000 (20,000 dinars).

Religious institutions must be accorded official recognition through application to the prime minister's office to own land and administer sacraments, including marriage. 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 (trusts) 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 it 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; however, the government revoked the tax-exempt status of the Jordanian Evangelical Theological Seminary (JETS), which it does not allow to accept Muslim students. Groups registered as "societies" and not denominations are subject to the 2008 Law on Associations that requires government approval of a group's budget and for any group meetings. 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 as "societies," and so 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 Ministry of Justice 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 complain of 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 Baha'i Faith is likewise unrecognized by the government, and Baha'is face official discrimination. On national identity cards and family books, the government records Baha'is 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. The Baha'i 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 Baha'i 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 Baha'i mother registered inaccurately as a Muslim is considered illegitimate under Islamic law, will not be issued a birth certificate, and subsequently is unable to receive citizenship or register for school. The government does not officially recognize Baha'i schools or places of worship. There are two recognized Baha'i 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 Baha'i 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.

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 must associate themselves with a recognized religion for purposes of official identification.

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.

As of the end of the reporting period, the government had not responded to a March 2010 petition from the JETS to reinstate its tax-exempt status, first revoked in 2006. JETS, a Christian training school for pastors and other Christian leaders licensed by the government in 1995, was denied accreditation in 2004 but operated as an educational institution under the Ministry of Culture. Because JETS was not accredited, its foreign students and professors were not eligible for residency permits and may only enter the country on tourist visas of limited duration; consequently, their foreign student enrolment decreased; the government did issue visas to JETS visiting professors during the reporting period.

Some Baha'i 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 Baha'i, who is married to a Baha'i 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 Baha'i 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, though the number of instances declined from previous years. Security officials reportedly did not state a reason for their presence. A few religious leaders also reported being summoned by the General Intelligence Directorate (GID) for questioning on their church's activities and church membership.

A few religious leaders reported the sporadic denial of visas to foreign adherents coming to the country to attend workshops and conferences. Religious leaders reported that they and other congregants were often questioned by the GID during travel in and out of the country, including occasional attempts to convert them to Islam.

Abuses of Religious Freedom

In 2009 a court charged a literary figure with defamation of Islam, sentencing him to fines and time in jail. At the end of 2009, 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 this reporting period.

During the reporting period, an apostasy case brought to the Amman Islamic law court by the brother of a citizen who converted from Islam to the Baha'i Faith remained pending. The case was initiated in March 2007. The 56-year-old defendant converted when he was 19, so there appears 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 GID officers after family members complained to authorities about the conversion. GID personnel reportedly questioned their beliefs, threatened court and other actions, and offered rewards for denouncing the conversion, such as employment opportunities. These converts also reported that GID personnel withheld certificates of good behavior required for job applications or to open a business; they also 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 GID 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. It also accused 40 unofficial "missionary sects," which were widely understood implicitly to include local evangelical churches, of fomenting sectarian strife with Muslims and threatening public security. 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 the *Ammon* news Web site (<http://ammonnews.net>). Parliament endorsed the declaration, and it appeared on the Web site of the country's embassy in Washington, DC.

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

Forced Religious Conversion

There were no reports of forced religious conversion.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Some religious groups, such as the Baha'is, while allowed to meet and practice their faith, faced some societal discrimination. Iraqi Sabean 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.

The media, editorial cartoons, articles, and opinion pieces sometimes conflated anti-Israeli sentiment with anti-Jewish 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 implement the U.S. Department of State's multiphase exchange program to send national religious scholars, teachers, and leaders to the United States to promote tolerance and a better understanding of religious freedom as a fundamental human right and source of stability.

In July 2009 the embassy hosted a one-week visit of Georgetown University Imam Yahya Hendi, including discussions with Muslim leaders and scholars on

interfaith issues and on President Obama's Cairo address on outreach to the Muslim world. This program also included extensive media engagement, notably a one-hour live interview on the Islamist Fact International Jordan radio station.

The U.S. government sponsored an International Visitor single-country program under the theme "The Role of Religion in the U.S.," for imams in October 2009. The ambassador then hosted a coffee and discussion with the participating imams on December 21, 2009, focusing on the challenges of interfaith understanding and the need to promote tolerance.

The embassy screened U.S. filmmaker Anisa Mehdi's documentary "Inside Mecca" at a variety of venues with youth throughout the reporting period, including discussions on religious identity and cross-cultural dialogue.

During the reporting period, several speaker events organized by embassy officials engaged youth on interfaith dialogue, the history of Islam in the United States, and Muslim life in America.

In cooperation with the Institute of International Education and the Ibrahim Family Foundation, the embassy facilitated the second year of a program to provide U.S. undergraduate students of different faiths with the opportunity to participate in a 10-day study tour in Abu Dhabi, Jordan, and Israel during June 2010.

[Back to Top](#)