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Jordan: Situation and treatment of Christians; state protection and support services

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1. Overview

Statistics on the number of Christians in Jordan range from 1.5 to 3 percent (US 13 Sept. 2011, 1, 2) and 6 percent of the population (ibid. 20 June 2012; Freedom House 2011). The US Central Intelligence Agency World Factbook indicates that these Christians are mostly Greek Orthodox, although there are also Greek and Roman Catholic, Syrian Orthodox, Coptic Orthodox, Armenian Orthodox, and Protestant denominations (US 20 June 2012). Although there aren't any major geographic concentrations of Christians, there are large Christian populations in Husn (in the north), Fuheis (near Amman), Madaba, and Karak (US 13 Sept. 2011, 2). The remaining population consists of Sunni Muslims, comprising between 92 percent (Freedom House 2011) and 95 percent of the population (US 13 Sept. 2011, 1), and 2 percent Shia, Bahai and Druz (ibid., 2).

2. Legal Status

Sources indicate that the state religion is Islam (Freedom House 2011; US 13 Sept. 2011, 1). Minority Rights Group International (MRG) indicates that Christians are allowed to worship in public (n.d.). The July to December 2010 US *International Religious Freedom Report* states that although some Christian denominations are legally recognized (13 Sept. 2011, 2), others are not (ibid., 7). According to the report:

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. (ibid., 2)

The US *International Religious Freedom Report* indicates that recognized denominations are financially and administratively independent of the government (ibid., 5). The report adds that societies follow the 2008 Law on Associations which entails "administrative restrictions" such as acquiring government approval of budgets and foreign funding, and providing the government with information regarding by-laws and board members (ibid., 5). According to the US *International Religious Freedom Report*, some societies have not been allowed to hold public meetings (ibid., 6).

The US *International Religious Freedom Report* indicates that religious courts handle all matters relating to personal status, including religion, marriage, divorce, child custody, and inheritance (13 Sept. 2011, 3). For personal status matters, Christians whose denominations are recognized by the government attend Tribunals of Religious Committees that are specific to their denomination (ibid.). According to the US *International Religious Freedom Report*, between July and December of 2010, there were three tribunals: Catholic, Greek Orthodox, and Anglican (ibid.). The report added that Protestant denominations registered as societies fall under the jurisdiction of the Anglican tribunal (ibid.).

Sources indicate that a Muslim woman is prohibited from marrying a non-Muslim man (MRG July 2011, 224; Human Rights Watch Jan. 2012). According to the Australian Government's Refugee Review Tribunal, Christians and Muslims avoid intermarrying (30 Apr. 2010).

3. Situation of Christians

Although MRG describes the Jordanian government as "overwhelmingly tolerant" of Christians, and characterizes Christian and Muslim relations as "mostly good" (n.d.), media sources indicate that many Christians have emigrated from Jordan (*The Jordan Times* 8 Jan. 2012; *Sojourners Magazine* 1 Dec. 2011; BBC 6 Apr. 2012). Sources list different reasons for Christian emigration from Jordan, including: fear due to anti-Christian incidents and violence in the Middle East (*Sojourners Magazine* 1 Dec. 2011), increased religious extremism (*The Jordan Times* 8 Jan. 2012), economic reasons (*Sojourners Magazine* 1 Dec. 2011; *The Jordan Times* 8 Jan. 2012), political pressure, instability, and mixed marriages (ibid.).

3.1 Education

According to MRG, Christian students do not have to receive Islamic teachings in state-administered schools (n.d.). The US *International Religious Freedom Report* states that when Islamic teachings are being taught in public schools, Christian students may leave the classroom, although the report also states that Christian students must learn the Qur'an and Islamic poetry both in public and private schools (13 Sept. 2011, 6). The report adds that Christians can open their own schools if they comply with the law and allow the government to control the curricula; and that Christian private schools exist in numerous cities (ibid., 6, 7).

3.2 Political and Military Participation

Sources indicate that 9 seats in parliament are reserved for Christians (Jordan n.d.; US 13 Sept. 2011, 4; MRG July 2011, 223) out of a total of 120 seats (ibid.; US 13 Sept. 2011, 4). The US *International Religious Freedom*

Report indicates that these seats are in the lower house of parliament, and that Christians cannot run for parliament outside of these seats (ibid.). The report adds that in November 2010, there were 6 Christians appointed to the upper house of parliament (ibid.). Sources state that Christians often serve as cabinet ministers (US 13 Sept. 2011, 4; MRG n.d.).

Sources state that Christians serve in high positions in the military (Jordan n.d.; Jamestown Foundation 13 Nov. 2009; MRG n.d.). According to the US Department of State's *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2011*, the government usually reserves some high level military positions for Christians, although all senior command positions are held by Muslims (24 May 2012, 15).

4. Treatment of Christians

According to MRG, Christians are legally prohibited from proselytizing to Muslims (n.d.). The US *International Religious Freedom Report* states that some Christians suspected of proselytizing are monitored by the authorities (13 Sept. 2011, 1).

The US *International Religious Freedom Report* indicates that security services have taken Christian leaders into questioning regarding church activities and membership (13 Sept. 2011, 8). The report also states that, when travelling in and out of Jordan, religious leaders and members of Christian congregations have been questioned by security services who, at times, have also tried to convert the Christian travellers to Islam (US 13 Sept. 2011, 8).

According to the Jamestown Foundation, a research and analysis institution that provides information on issues that are strategically important to the United States (n.d.), the targeting of Christians and churches by extremists has been a new development in Jordan (13 Nov. 2009). Sources report on attacks or attempted attacks on churches, in 2008 and 2009 (US 5 Aug. 2010; Jamestown Foundation 13 Nov. 2009; *Los Angeles Times* 28 Jan. 2009).

In 2008, a Christian choir group was attacked in Amman (US 5 Aug. 2010; *Los Angeles Times* 28 Jan. 2009). The *Los Angeles Times* reports that six people were wounded, including four Lebanese musicians (ibid.).

In Irbid, an attempted attack on a church and a Christian cemetery (US 5 Aug. 2010; Jamestown Foundation 13 Nov. 2009) in 2008 did not cause any casualties (ibid.). Sources state that the suspects allegedly used Molotov cocktails (ibid.; *Los Angeles Times* 28 Jan. 2009). The attempted attacks were allegedly planned in retaliation after a Christian boy "insulted" the Prophet Muhammed (ibid.; Jamestown Foundation 13 Nov. 2009). The Jamestown Foundation says that the suspects were Al-Qaeda members (ibid.), while the US Country Report on Terrorism says that the suspects were Al-Qaeda sympathizers (US 5 Aug. 2010). The Jamestown Foundation states that in October 2009, 12 Jordanians were sentenced to 15-20 year jail sentences for these attacks (13 Nov. 2009).

In March 2009, in Marka, Amman, 3 Jordanians plotted a suicide car bomb attack on a Roman Catholic Church (US 5 Aug. 2010; Jamestown Foundation 13 Nov. 2009). The three suspects were sentenced to approximately 22 years in jail (ibid.; US 5 Aug. 2010).

5. Treatment of Converts to Christianity

The US *International Religious Freedom Report* indicates that conversion from Islam to another religion is against Islamic law and prohibited by the Jordanian government (13 Sept. 2011, 1, 3). Legally, Christian converts from Islam are still considered to be Muslims and must follow Muslim laws (MRG n.d.; US 13 Sept. 2011, 3). US government sources indicate that people who have converted from Islam to another religion have faced social ostracism, societal discrimination and harassment (24 May 2012, 1), as well as physical abuse, verbal abuse, psychological abuse, and threats (13 Sept. 2011, 1, 10). The US *International Religious Freedom Report* indicates that "a few" Muslim converts to Christianity are monitored, and that some have been summoned and questioned by the security service (13 Sept. 2011, 1, 8). The security service reportedly questions these converts on their beliefs, withholds documents required for employment, instructs their employers to fire them, and threatens them with "court and other actions" (US 13 Sept. 2011, 8-9). Corroborating information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

According to the Amman Centre for Human Rights Studies, a centre dedicated to advocacy, research and training related to human rights and democracy (29 May 2008), converting out of Islam is considered to be apostasy (Amman Centre for Human Rights Studies Oct. 2010, 11). According to the US *International Religious Freedom Report*, anyone can file an apostasy complaint against converts from Islam, and "in recent years" families have filed apostasy charges in Islamic court (13 Sept. 2011, 3). Sources report that apostasy cases have led to court proceedings (US 13 Sept. 2011, 1; Amman Centre for Human Rights Studies Oct. 2010, 11). The Amman Centre for Human Rights Studies states that a few years ago someone was sentenced for converting to Christianity (ibid.).

Sources indicate that converts from Islam may lose certain rights (Freedom House 2011; US 13 Sept. 2011, 1). For example, the US *International Religious Freedom Report* notes that Islamic court judges overseeing cases related to conversion have ruled to annul marriages, transfer custody to a Muslim that is not the child's parent, give the convert's property to Muslim family members, and declare the convert's children as "without any religious identity" (13 Sept. 2011, 3).

6. Security Personnel at Churches

According to the US *International Religious Freedom Report*, there has been an increase of "non-intrusive" monitoring of churches, church services, and Christian leaders for "security reasons" (13 Sept. 2011, 1). The report indicates that security personnel in plain clothes are often present outside of churches, and goes on to explain that this monitoring is "generally welcomed" as leaders believe it is done to protect Christians since Christian groups have been threatened in the region (US 13 Sept. 2011, 1, 8).

7. Council of Church Leaders

Sources indicate that in January 2009, the government recognized the Council of Church Leaders (The Jamestown Foundation 13 Nov. 2009; US 13 Sept. 2011, 4). The US *International Religious Freedom Report* states that the Council consists of the leaders of Jordan's 11 officially recognized Christian

churches (ibid.). According to the US report, this Council advises the government about all Christian-related matters, and serves as an administrative body that works with the government to deal with matters such as the issuance of work permits, land permits, and marriage and birth certificates (13 Sept. 2011, 4). The US *International Religious Freedom Report* states that although unrecognized Christian denominations are not represented on the Council, they are still required to conduct government-related business through the Council (13 Sept. 2011, 4). However, the report adds that there have been concerns over the Council of Church Leaders' ability to manage all Christian affairs in an efficient and just manner (US 13 Sept. 2011, 4).

This Response was prepared after researching publicly accessible information currently available to the Research Directorate within time constraints. This Response is not, and does not purport to be, conclusive as to the merit of any particular claim for refugee protection. Please find below the list of sources consulted in researching this Information Request.

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Additional Sources Consulted

Oral sources: Attempts to contact an Academic Fellow in Religion and Politics at the University of Scotland, a Professor at the University of Southern California, and a Social Anthropologist were unsuccessful. A Political Science professor at the University of Guelph was unable to provide information for this Response.

Internet sites, including: *Al Jazeera*; Amnesty International; Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies; *The Christian Post*; *The Christian Science Monitor*; Christian Solidarity Worldwide; Eoi.net; Forum 18; Hudson Institute; *The*

Huffington Post; International Christian Concern; International Crisis Group; Jordan — Ministry of Awqaf and Islamic Affairs and Holy Places, Ministry of Social Development, National Center for Human Rights, Royal Institute for Interfaith Studies; Middle East Media Research Institute; *The National*; National Catholic Reporter; News.va; Open Doors UK and Ireland; UN — Integrated Regional Information Networks, Refworld, UNHCR Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief; United States — Congressional Research Service; World Organization Against Torture.

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