



Australian Government
Refugee Review Tribunal

Country Advice Jordan

Jordan – JOR36525 – Christians – Muslims
– Communal violence – State protection
30 April 2010

1. What is the current situation and treatment of Christians by Muslims in Jordan?

Most of the limited sources on this topic indicate that the Jordanian Christian and Muslim population are generally amicable and the Christian population is well integrated in Jordanian society. It appears, however, that in order to maintain the status quo the communities avoid issues of intermarriage and Muslim conversion to Christianity. There were no reports of sectarian incidents prior to 2008 when 12 Jordanian members of Al Qaeda attacked two local Churches. It appears that Jordanian Christians have now become a new target for the group. Nonetheless, though the Christian community appears concerned about the rise of Islamism in the region, the same does not apply to the local context in Jordan.

General Situation

According to a range of sources, more than 92 % of the Jordanian population is Sunni Muslim. Estimates of the number of Christian citizens vary from 1.5 to 5 % of the population with the majority being Greek Orthodox. According to church leaders there are an estimated 150,000 Christians in Jordan.¹

A number of sources confirm that Jordanian Christians do not feel threatened and live harmoniously with local Muslims.² In a paper on Palestinian Christians in Jordan, the author noted that their economic, social and political strength remains disproportionate to their actual size and has 'provided a source of envy for other minorities, however reactions have been largely restrained, enabling Jordan to successfully blend its multi-faith society into a relatively peaceful coexistence'.³ A 2008 article by an Abu Dhabi newspaper, *The National*, described how Jordanian Christians show their solidarity by celebrating the Ramadan season with their Muslim counterparts.⁴ Similarly, in a 2006 article in the *Yemen Observer*, the Jordanian (Christian) author described how growing up in Jordan she used to celebrate Ramadan with her Muslim friends and said:

¹ US Department of State 2009, International Religious Freedom Report for 2009 – Jordan, 26 October, Section 1. – Attachment 1; International Christian Concern 2003, 'Middle East: Jordan' International Christian Concern website, January <http://persecution.org/Countries/jordan.html> – Accessed 19 April 2010 – Attachment 2.

² Ma'ayeh, S.P. 2008, 'Christmas cheer alive in Jordan' *The National* (Abu Dhabi), 24 December <http://www.thenational.ae/article/20081224/FOREIGN/246644891/1011> – Accessed 19 April 2010 – Attachment 3; Houser, G. 2009, 'Jordan: An oasis of peace, Reflections from a trip to Jordan' *The Mennonite*, 1 December http://www.themennonite.org/issues/12-22/articles/Jordan_An_oasis_of_peace- Accessed 27 April 2010 – Attachment 4; Schreuder, S. 2009, 'Country Update: Jordan' European Forum for Democracy and Solidarity website, 10 December <http://www.europeanforum.net/country/jordan> – Accessed 27 April 2010 – Attachment 5.

³ Gandolfo, L. (undated), 'The Palestinian Christian Diaspora in Jordan', p.2 <http://www.surrey.ac.uk/Arts/CRONEM/krakow/Luisa-Gandolfo.doc> – Accessed 21 April 2010 – Attachment 6.

⁴ Ma'ayeh, S.P. 2008, 'Ramadan unites faiths in Jordan' *The National* (Abu Dhabi), 14 September <http://www.thenational.ae/article/20080914/FOREIGN/669944587/1011/SPORT> – Accessed 21 April 2010 – Attachment 7.

Throughout my life in Jordan in the Middle East, I have had no problem being a Christian among a majority of Muslims. As Jordanians, never have we thought about religious differences. Instead, it has always been about our nationality. Being Arabs and Jordanians was more important to us than being Christians or Muslims. Religion has been "shadowed by our Jordanian tent," to put it the Jordanian way.⁵

A 2009 article in the American-based *National Catholic Reporter* also claims that when speaking to ordinary Jordanians, both Muslim and Christian, they say the country's Muslim majority and its small Christian minority live in harmony; however, it also highlights that divisions run deep when it comes to the issue of inter-marriage and Muslim conversion to Christianity.⁶ This is consistent and reflective of the government's policy of banning Muslim conversion (see further detail below). Therefore, the two communities appear to respect each other as long as there is no threat to their mutually existing lifestyles and beliefs.

Muslim Brotherhood

It is of note that the political wing of Jordanian's Muslim Brotherhood, The Islamic Action Front Party (IAF), is the most prominent Jordanian opposition party. It seeks the application of Islamic Sharia in various fields of life.⁷ The IAF has, however, consistently rejected the use of violence to achieve its domestic political goals.⁸ A report by the US Library of Congress notes that much of their support derives from middle class Jordanians of Palestinian origin and their educational, social, and health services have grown so extensive over the years that some experts believe that the Brotherhood's budget for services rivals that of the Jordanian government.⁹ Though this indicates that the IAF may have a significant influence on the Muslim population in Jordan, there is no indication that they are a threat to the minority Christian population. Of interest, in February 2007, a Christian was elected to the administrative board of the IAF's Amman branch, becoming the first non-Muslim to join the leadership of the organisation. He, however, resigned shortly after citing 'religious and Christian pressure'.¹⁰ Though the IAF does not appear to be a direct threat to the local Christian population, this event reiterates that whilst Jordanian Muslims and Christians give the appearance of mutual respect towards each other, a certain distance between the communities is maintained most likely to avoid any threat to the status quo.

⁵ Assaf, R. 2006, 'Muslim and Christian Arabs' *zawya.com*. source: *Yemen Observer*, 23 September <http://www.zawya.com/printstory.cfm?storyid=ZAWYA20060928090611&l=090600060923> – Accessed 21 April 2010 – Attachment 8.

⁶ Allen Jr, J.L. 2009, 'Even in Jordan, Christian-Muslim ties not always easy' *National Catholic Reporter*, 9 May <http://ncronline.org/news/vatican/even-jordan-christian-muslim-ties-not-always-easy> – Accessed 19 April 2010 – Attachment 9.

⁷ Al Abbadi, A.S 2007, 'Jordanian IAF Christian Member Resigns Over Pressures' *Ikhwanweb.com* website, 26 February <http://www.ikhwanweb.com/article.php?id=2321> – Accessed 20 April 2010 – Attachment 10.

⁸ Glennie, A. 2007, 'Reform in Jordan: The role of Political Islamists' November, Institute for Public Policy Research website, 19 November, p.11 <http://www.ippr.org.uk/publicationsandreports/publication.asp?id=576> – Accessed 20 April 2010 – Attachment 11.

⁹ The Library of Congress 2006, 'U.S. Democracy Promotion Policy in the Middle East: The Islamist Dilemma: Jordan' Naval Historical Centre website, 15 June <http://www.history.navy.mil/library/online/democ%20in%20middle%20east.htm#jordan> – Accessed 20 April 2010 – Attachment 12.

¹⁰ Glennie, A. 2007, 'Reform in Jordan: The role of Political Islamists' November, Institute for Public Policy Research website, 19 November, p.14 <http://www.ippr.org.uk/publicationsandreports/publication.asp?id=576> – Accessed 20 April 2010 – Attachment 11; Al Abbadi, A.S 2007, 'Jordanian IAF Christian Member Resigns Over Pressures' *Ikhwanweb.com* website, 26 February <http://www.ikhwanweb.com/article.php?id=2321> – Accessed 20 April 2010 – Attachment 10.

Al Qaeda

Two reports claim that in 2008 twelve alleged Jordanian members of Al Qaeda attacked two local Churches. According to a Jordanian official, 'The al-Qaeda members tried to attack a Latin church in Irbid [in North Jordan] in July last year after a Christian boy allegedly insulted the Prophet Muhammed, but the attempt failed... Following that, they attacked the same church again using Molotov [cocktail bombs] and a Christian cemetery in Irbid, but caused no casualties'. According to a report by the Jamestown Foundation *Terrorism Monitor*, in October 2009 the State Security Court of Jordan imposed jail sentences of 15 to 20 years on the twelve accused. The report also notes that prior to these attacks, there were no records of sectarian incidents against Christians in Jordan. The Christians and their places of worship were not formerly major targets for the Salafi-Jihadis, but it seems that the new generation of Salafi-Jihadis is inspired by late leader of al-Qaeda in Iraq, Jordanian Abu Musab al-Zarqawi's legacy of targeting the "non-believers," such as Shiites, Christians, and Jews. In the same report it noted that in March 2009 the State Security Court of Jordan sentenced three Jordanians to 22½ years in prison for plotting a suicide car bomb attack on a church in Amman. Their plan called for bombing a Roman Catholic Church in Amman's eastern district of Marka after initially planning to strike against a police battalion.¹¹ Therefore, Jordanian Christians have become the recent target of Muslim extremists groups such as Al Qaeda. Whilst this appears to indicate that a small number of Jordanians have been influenced by Muslim extremists, there is no information to indicate that such extremist views have permeated the rest of Jordanian's Muslim population.

Not surprisingly an article by *The National* (UAE/Abu Dhabi) claims that 'The rising tide of Islamism in the region has also become a source of concern for Christian families.'¹² A 2004 *BBC News* article on Jordanian Christians notes that a local Jordanian priest believes that events in Iraq and the Middle East are causing some Jordanian Muslims to ask, for the first time, 'Who exactly are you Christians?' As a result, the author claims that Jordanian Christians are starting to feel themselves pushed towards an uncomfortable choice: whether they belong to the Western world, or the Arab world.¹³ A 2004 article on Muslims and Christians in Jordan by a Jordanian journalist, however, suggests that this is not a real concern for the community as 'The Christians in Jordan have a lot going for them. Their survival in Jordan has never been threatened by the state. Unlike many Arab Christians in neighbouring Muslim countries, they have never been subjected to religious persecution, nor were they victims of political oppression.' The author, instead, highlights that the only real concern is the diminishing number of Arab Christians in the region as a result of emigration.¹⁴ In a study of Palestinian Christians in Jordan, the author also argued that rising Islamism was not a significant factor in their choice to emigrate 'particularly when considered in comparison to alternative incentives – financial, familial – and Jordan's enviable record as a placid and

¹¹ Batal al Shishani, M. 2009, 'Neo-Zarqawists Target the Arab Christians of Jordan' *The Jamestown Foundation Terrorism Monitor*, 13 November, vol.7, Issue no. 34

[http://www.jamestown.org/single/?no_cache=1&tx_ttnews\[tt_news\]=35727&tx_ttnews\[backPid\]=7&cHash=2fc8c6320d](http://www.jamestown.org/single/?no_cache=1&tx_ttnews[tt_news]=35727&tx_ttnews[backPid]=7&cHash=2fc8c6320d) – Accessed 19 April 2010 – Attachment 13; 'Jordan: 12 men charged with terrorist attacks' 2009, Associated Press, 27 January – Attachment 14.

¹² Ma'ayeh, S.P. 2008, 'Christmas cheer alive in Jordan' *The National* (Abu Dhabi), 24 December <http://www.thenational.ae/article/20081224/FOREIGN/246644891/1011> – Accessed 19 April 2010 – Attachment 3.

¹³ Buckley, M. 2004, 'Uneasy times for Jordan's Christians' *BBC News*, 31 January http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/programmes/from_our_own_correspondent/3443169.stm – Accessed 21 April 2010 – Attachment 15.

¹⁴ Sabbagh-Gargour, R. 2004, 'Jordan's Muslims and Christians face the same challenges' *bitterlemons-international.org* website, 9 December <http://www.bitterlemons-international.org/previous.php?opt=1&id=64#260> – Accessed 21 April 2010 – Attachment 16.

tolerant society.¹⁵ Therefore, it is reasonable to conclude that whilst the Jordanian Christian community is concerned about the rise of Islamism in the region, this is not a current concern on the domestic level in Jordan.

2. What is the authorities' attitude towards Jordanian Christians and the availability of state protection?

The Jordanian government is regularly described as 'open' and 'tolerant' in regards to its religious minorities and towards the local Christian community in general. There is no indication that it would not offer adequate state protection to a Jordanian merely on the basis of being Christian.

It is of note that when Al Qaeda operatives attacked two local Jordanian churches in 2008 and plotted a further attack on another church (referred to above), the accused were tried, convicted and sentenced to substantial jail terms.

A variety of sources state that whilst the Constitution of Jordan pronounces Islam as the state religion, it also provides for freedom of religion and prohibits discrimination on the basis of religion.¹⁶ The Jordanian government has been regularly lauded for its efforts to encourage inter-faith dialogue.¹⁷ For example, in 2004, King Abdullah delivered a statement which became known as the 'Amman Message' which attempting to define Islam in order to clarify to the rest of the world the true nature of the faith. This then initiated a number of declarations and conferences on Islam.¹⁸ Furthermore, in 2007, Jordan's Royal Aal al-Bayt Institute for Islamic Thought issued the infamous statement letter to Pope Benedict XVI titled 'A Common Word Between Us and You' signed by 138 prominent Muslim scholars which highlighted the commonalities between Christianity and Islam. It was the first time Muslims had delivered a definitive consensus statement on Christianity and is considered the world's leading interfaith dialogue initiative between Christians and Muslims.¹⁹

According to the 2009 US Department of State Report on International Religious Freedom in Jordan, Christians serve regularly as cabinet ministers. Of the 110 seats of the Lower House of Parliament, nine are reserved for Christians. In November 2007 the King appointed four

¹⁵ Gandolfo, L. (undated), 'The Palestinian Christian Diaspora in Jordan', p.12

<http://www.surrey.ac.uk/Arts/CRONEM/krakow/Luisa-Gandolfo.doc> – Accessed 21 April 2010 – Attachment 6.

¹⁶ US Department of State 2009, International Religious Freedom Report for 2009 – Jordan, 26 October, Section 1. – Attachment 1; International Christian Concern 2003, 'Middle East: Jordan' International Christian Concern website, January <http://persecution.org/Countries/jordan.html> – Accessed 19 April 2010 – Attachment 2; Kumpf, D. 2009, 'The Kingdom of Jordan: Intra-faith Dialogue, Inter-faith Diplomacy' The Review of Faith and International Affairs website, 20 March <http://www.rfiaonline.org/extras/articles/411-jordan-dialogue-and-diplomacy> – Accessed 29 April 2010 – Attachment 17;

¹⁷ 'King: Interfaith dialogue necessary to end conflicts' 2008, *Jordan News Agency*, 13 November <http://www.petra.gov.jo/Artical.aspx?Lng=1&Section=8&Artical=71009> – Accessed 29 April 2010 – Attachment 18.

¹⁸ 'The Amman Message: Summary' (undated) The Official Amman Message website <http://www.ammanmessage.com/> – Accessed 29 April 2010 – Attachment 19.

¹⁹ Robinson, B.A. 2007, 'Islam and peace: A letter from 138 Muslim scholars to Christians, at the end of Ramadan, 2007' ReligiousTolerance.org website, 16 October <http://www.religioustolerance.org/islpeace.htm> – Accessed 29 April 2010 – Attachment 20; 'Introduction to a Common Word between Us and You' (undated) The Official website of A Common Word <http://www.acommonword.com/> – Accessed 29 April 2010 – Attachment 21; 'A Common Word between Us and You' 2010, Wikipedia website, 13 March (last updated) http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/A_Common_Word_Between_Us_and_You – Accessed 29 April 2010 – Attachment 22. **Note:** Wikipedia is a Web-based free-content encyclopaedia which is compiled collaboratively by volunteers. Wikipedia articles can be useful introductory reading for a new topic, and the list of references in Wikipedia articles can provide useful leads to reliable sources. Many Wikipedia articles can be highly reliable, especially in regards to non-controversial historical or factual matters, and Wikipedia uses preventative measures against vandalism, bias and inaccuracy. However, the collaborative nature of Wikipedia makes it vulnerable to contributors with overt or covert agendas, and Wikipedia articles are thus prone to unacknowledged bias.

Christians to serve in the Upper House. The Government traditionally reserves some positions in the upper levels of the military for Christians (4 percent).²⁰ International Christian Concern also reported that Christians are represented in government, media, and academia in numbers higher than their percentage in the population.²¹

Despite the above, the Jordanian government prohibits conversion from Islam but allows conversion to Islam.²² The government has also deported foreign evangelists in the past because they 'were trying to convert members of Jordan's older Christian faiths'.²³ Rather than an attack on Christians, these dictates appear to be an attempt by the Jordanian government to maintain internal stability amongst the various religious communities within Jordan.

3. Please profile the neighbourhood of 'Ashrafieh'.

Located in East Amman, the residents of Ashrafieh may be considered more traditional, conservative and economically disadvantaged than other parts of Amman. Once a predominantly Christian area, it now has a diverse community '...including a Palestinian refugee camp, a large Christian community of various denominations, as well as Iraqi citizens'. There is no information that indicates that Muslims now dominate the area and no reports of sectarian tension in the area were found.

Ashrafieh (or 'Ashrafiyeh' or 'Jabal Ashrafiyeh') is a hill suburb located in 'East Amman' which has been described by several sources as the poorer side of the Amman where the locals are considered more traditional and conservative as opposed to the more western and affluent 'West Amman'.²⁴ An expat website also noted that East Amman has a 'stronger Islamic and Arabic culture'.²⁵ Please see attached map of Amman.²⁶

²⁰ US Department of State 2009, International Religious Freedom Report for 2009 – Jordan, 26 October, Section 1. – Attachment 1

²¹ International Christian Concern 2003, 'Middle East: Jordan' International Christian Concern website, January <http://persecution.org/Countries/jordan.html> – Accessed 19 April 2010 – Attachment 2.

²² US Department of State 2009, International Religious Freedom Report for 2009 – Jordan, 26 October, Section 1. – Attachment 1; International Christian Concern 2003, 'Middle East: Jordan' International Christian Concern website, January <http://persecution.org/Countries/jordan.html> – Accessed 19 April 2010 – Attachment 2.

²³ US Department of State 2009, International Religious Freedom Report for 2009 – Jordan, 26 October, Section 1. – Attachment 1; Mustafa, A.J. 2008, 'Jordan Govt Deports Christian Missionaries' Arabnews.com, 21 February

<http://archive.arabnews.com/?page=4§ion=0&article=107025&d=21&m=2&y=2008&pix=world.jpg&category=World> – Accessed 19 April 2010 – Attachment 23; Reynalds, J. 2008, 'Jordan Deports Evangelical Christians' ASSIST News Service, 9 March <http://www.assistnews.net/Stories/2008/s08030056.htm> – Accessed 19 April 2010 – Attachment 24; Batal al Shishani, M. 2009, 'Neo-Zarqawists Target the Arab Christians of Jordan' The Jamestown Foundation *Terrorism Monitor*, 13 November, vol.7, Issue no. 34

[http://www.jamestown.org/single/?no_cache=1&tx_ttnews\[tt_news\]=35727&tx_ttnews\[backPid\]=7&cHash=2fc8c6320d](http://www.jamestown.org/single/?no_cache=1&tx_ttnews[tt_news]=35727&tx_ttnews[backPid]=7&cHash=2fc8c6320d) – Accessed 19 April 2010 – Attachment 13; 'Unholy row in Jordan over missionaries' 2008, ninemsn.com.au website, source: *Agence France Press*, 15 March

<http://news.ninemsn.com.au/article.aspx?id=392241&rss=yes> – Accessed 19 April 2010 – Attachment 25.

²⁴ al-Asad, M. 2008, 'A new Amman, for better and for worse' *The Jordan Times*, 5 June <http://www.jordantimes.com/index.php?news=8377> – Accessed 28 April 2010 – Attachment 26; United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia 2005, *Urbanization and the Changing Character of the Arab City*, United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia website, 19 April, p.3

<http://www.escwa.un.org/information/publications/edit/upload/sdd-05-1-e.pdf> – Accessed 28 April 2010 – Attachment 27; 'Tanya' 2009, 'Amman, Jordan: Hub of the Levant' expatify.com website, 4 November <http://www.expatify.com/jordan/amman-jordan-hub-of-the-levant.html> – Accessed 28 April 2010 – Attachment 28.

²⁵ 'Tanya' 2009, 'Amman, Jordan: Hub of the Levant' expatify.com website, 4 November <http://www.expatify.com/jordan/amman-jordan-hub-of-the-levant.html> – Accessed 28 April 2010 – Attachment 28.

²⁶ 'Map of Amman' (undated) <http://www.ussbg.com/images/jordan/AmmanMap.JPG> – Accessed 28 April 2010 – Attachment 29.

Considered an old suburb,²⁷ it appears to have been previously characterised as a Christian area. According to a 2005 United Nations Report on the Urbanization and the Changing Character of the Arab City, until the 1970s, some neighbourhoods in Amman were even primarily inhabited by Christians. However, since then and with rapid urbanization, neighbourhoods ‘have shed their denominational characteristics’.²⁸ This is consistent with a 1973 report on Christians in the Arab East which noted that majority of Christian Armenian and Syrians residing in Jordan live in ‘Ashrafiyeh Hill’.²⁹ According to McGill University’s (Canada) Middle East Program, which has established a number of community development centres in Amman, one of which is in Ashrafieh, it noted that the neighbourhood now has ‘many diverse communities....including a Palestinian refugee camp, a large Christian community of various denominations, as well as Iraqi citizens’.³⁰

No other information could be found regarding the profile of Ashrafieh.

Attachments

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²⁷ Namrouqa, H. 2008, ‘GAM seeks to revive downtown spirit’ *The Jordan Times*, 23 June <http://www.jordantimes.com/index.php?news=8810> – Accessed 28 April 2010 – Attachment 30.

²⁸ United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia 2005, *Urbanization and the Changing Character of the Arab City*, United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia website, 19 April, p.3 <http://www.escwa.un.org/information/publications/edit/upload/sdd-05-1-e.pdf> – Accessed 28 April 2010 – Attachment 27.

²⁹ Walz, L.H (Rev), 1973, ‘Christians in the Arab East’ Americans for Middle East Understanding website, source: The Link, vol. 6, Issue 5, November – December <http://www.ameu.org/printer.asp?iid=72&aid=114> – Accessed 28 April 2010 – Attachment 31.

³⁰ ‘Community Development Centre (CDC) – Amman, Jordan’ (undated) McGill University website <http://www.mcgill.ca/mmep/centres/cdc/> – Accessed 28 April 2010 – Attachment 32.

8. Assaf, R. 2006, 'Muslim and Christian Arabs' *zawya.com*. source: *Yemen Observer*, 23 September
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22. 'A Common Word between Us and You' 2010, Wikipedia website, 13 March (last updated) http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/A_Common_Word_Between_Us_and_You – Accessed 29 April 2010.
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26. al-Asad, M. 2008, 'A new Amman, for better and for worse' *The Jordan Times*, 5 June <http://www.jordantimes.com/index.php?news=8377> – Accessed 28 April 2010.
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32. 'Community Development Centre (CDC) – Amman, Jordan' (undated) McGill University website <http://www.mcgill.ca/mmep/centres/cdc/> – Accessed 28 April 2010.