

JORDAN 2017 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution declares Islam the religion of the state but safeguards “the free exercise of all forms of worship and religious rites” as long as these are consistent with public order and morality. The constitution stipulates there shall be no discrimination based on religion. The constitution and the law accord primacy to sharia, which includes a prohibition against Muslims from converting to another religion, although conversions of Muslims continued to occur. According to the constitution, matters concerning the personal and family status of Muslims come under the jurisdiction of sharia courts, while six Christian groups have religious courts to address such matters for their members. The government continued to deny official recognition to some religious groups, including The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons) and Jehovah’s Witnesses. The government continued to monitor sermons at mosques and to require preachers to refrain from political commentary. During the year, the authorities began disseminating themes and recommended texts for sermons for all imams. Converts to Christianity from Islam reported security officials continued to interrogate them about their religious beliefs and practices. Members of unregistered groups continued to face problems registering their marriages and the religious affiliation of their children. The Ministry of Education rolled back revisions to the school curriculum, which sought to underscore the constitution’s commitment to respect pluralism and the opinions of others while instilling “true Islamic values” in students, after widespread complaints from teachers’ unions, parents’ groups, and Muslim organizations. Critics stated that the curriculum distanced students from Islamic values and promoted the normalization of relations with Israel.

Interfaith religious leaders reported an increase in online hate speech directed towards religious minorities and moderates, frequently through social media. The harshest criticisms targeted converts from Islam to other religions. Following a terrorist attack in January at a nightclub in Istanbul in which Jordanians were killed, social media commentators implied the victims should not be honored as martyrs because they visited an establishment some considered immoral. Authorities arrested online commentators who criticized the victims, and media outlets underscored the risk of prosecution for condemning the victims. Some converts to Christianity from Islam continued to report ostracism, as well as physical and verbal abuse, and some continued to worship in secret as a result of the social stigma they faced as converts. The government did not prosecute

converts from Islam for apostasy, but some reported persistent and credible threats from family members concerned with protecting traditional honor.

The U.S. Ambassador, Charge d’Affaires, and other embassy officers continued to engage with government officials at all levels to support the rights of religious minorities to practice their faiths freely and to promote interfaith tolerance in the educational curriculum. The Ambassador met with Muslim scholars and Christian community leaders to encourage interfaith dialogue. The embassy supported exchange programs promoting religious tolerance. The Department of State Special Advisor for Religious Minorities in Near East and South and Central Asia visited Amman and met with several religious communities to discuss their concerns, as well as with government officials to encourage support for the rights of all religious communities.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the population at 10.2 million (July 2017 estimate). According to U.S. government estimates, Muslims make up 97.2 percent of the population and Christians 2.2 percent. Groups together constituting less than 1 percent of the population include Buddhists, Bahais, Hindus, and Druze. These estimates do not include migrant workers or Syrian refugees. According to the Ministry of Labor, there are approximately 670,000 migrant workers in the country, mostly from Egypt, South and East Asia, and Africa. Migrant workers from Africa and South and East Asia are often Hindu or Christian. There are approximately 660,000 Syrian refugees in the country registered with UNHCR. The Syrian refugee population is mostly Sunni Muslim.

Christians tend to live in urban areas such as Amman, Fuhais, and Madaba.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution declares Islam the religion of the state. According to the constitution, the state shall safeguard the free exercise of all forms of worship and religious rites in accordance with the customs observed in the kingdom, unless those are inconsistent with public order or morality. The constitution stipulates there shall be no discrimination in the rights and duties of citizens on grounds of religion. It states the king must be a Muslim.

The constitution does not address the right of Muslims to convert to another faith, nor are there penalties under civil law for doing so. The constitution and the law accord primacy to sharia, however, which prohibits Muslims from converting to another religion. Under sharia, converts from Islam are still considered Muslims but regarded as apostates. The penal code contains articles criminalizing acts such as incitement of hatred, blasphemy against Abrahamic faiths, and undermining the regime, or portraying Jordanians in a manner that violates their dignity, according to government statements. Neither the penal code nor the criminal code specifies a penalty for apostasy. Sharia courts, however, have jurisdiction over marriage, divorce, and inheritance, and individuals declared to be apostates may have their marriages annulled or be disinherited, except in the presence of a will that states otherwise. Any member of society may file an apostasy complaint against such individuals before the newly established Sharia Public Prosecution.

Individuals who proselytize Muslims may be prosecuted in the State Security Court under the penal code's provisions against "inciting sectarian conflict" or "harming the national unity." Both of these offenses are punishable by imprisonment of up to two years or a fine of up to 50 Jordanian Dinars (JD) (\$71).

Islamic religious groups are granted recognition through the constitution and do not need to register. Non-Islamic religious groups must obtain official recognition through registration. If registered as "denominations," they may administer rites such as marriage (there is no provision for civil marriage). They may also own land, open bank accounts, and enter into contracts. Religious groups may also be registered as "associations" and if so, they must work through a recognized denomination on matters such as marriage, divorce, and inheritance, but may own property and open bank accounts. They must obtain government approval to accept foreign funding. Recognized non-Islamic religious groups are tax exempt but do not receive the government subsidies granted to Islamic religious groups.

Nonrecognized religious groups lack legal status and may not undertake basic administrative tasks such as opening bank accounts, purchasing real estate, or hiring staff. These groups may designate an individual to exercise these functions on their behalf.

To apply for registration, a religious group must submit its bylaws, a list of its members, its budget, and information about its religious doctrine. In determining whether to register or recognize Christian groups, the prime minister confers with the minister of the interior and the Council of Church Leaders (CCL), a government advisory body. The government also refers to the following criteria

when considering recognition of Christian groups: the group's teachings must not contradict the nature of the constitution, public ethics, customs, or traditions; the Middle East Council of Churches, a regional body comprising four families of churches (Catholic, Orthodox, Eastern Orthodox, and Protestant/Evangelical), must recognize it; its religious doctrine must not be antagonistic to Islam as the state religion; and the group's membership must meet a minimum number of citizens, although a precise figure is not specified.

The law lists 11 officially recognized Christian denominations: Greek Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Armenian Orthodox, Melkite Catholic, Anglican, Maronite Catholic, Lutheran, Syrian Orthodox, Seventh-day Adventist, United Pentecostal, and Coptic. Five Christian groups are not recognized as denominations by the government but are registered (and recognized) as associations: the Free Evangelical Church, Nazarene Church, Assemblies of God, Christian and Missionary Alliance, and Baptists. The government has continued to deny official recognition to some religious groups, including The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons) and Jehovah's Witnesses.

The CCL consists of the heads of the country's 11 officially recognized Christian denominations and serves as an administrative body to facilitate tax and customs exemptions, as well as the issuance of civil documents (marriage or inheritance). In other matters, such as issuing work permits or purchasing land, the denominations interact directly with the relevant ministries. Groups recognized as associations do not have representatives on the CCL and handle administrative tasks through the ministry with which they are registered as nonprofit organizations, or the ministry relevant to the task. Nonrecognized Christian groups do not have representatives on the CCL and have no legal status as entities and must have individual members of their groups conduct business with the government on their behalf.

According to the constitution, a special provision of the law regulates the activities and administration of finances of Muslim awqaf (religious endowments). Per this provision of the law, the Ministry of Awqaf and Islamic Affairs manages Islamic institutions and mosque construction. It also appoints imams, pays mosque staff salaries, manages Islamic clergy training centers, and subsidizes certain mosque-sponsored activities, such as holiday celebrations and religious observances.

According to the law, Muslim clergy who do not follow government policy may be suspended, issued a written warning, banned from delivering Friday sermons for a certain period, or dismissed from Ministry of Awqaf employment. In addition to

these administrative measures, a preacher who violates the law may be imprisoned for a period of one week to one month, or given a fine not to exceed 20 JD (\$28). The government also amended the law to forbid any Islamic cleric from providing a fatwa (formal religious guidance) unless officially authorized.

The law prohibits the publication of media items that slander or insult “founders of religion or prophets” or are deemed contemptuous of “any of the religions whose freedom is protected by the constitution,” and imposes a fine on violators of up to 20,000 JD (\$28,200).

By law, public schools provide Islamic religious instruction as part of the basic national curriculum, although non-Muslim students are allowed to opt out. Private schools may offer alternative religious instruction. The constitution provides “congregations” (a term not defined in the constitution, but legally including religious groups recognized as denominations and associations) with the right to establish their own schools provided “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 order to operate a school, religious institutions must receive permission from the Ministry of Education, which ensures the curriculum meets national standards. The Ministry of Education does not oversee religious courses if religious groups offer them at their places of worship. In several cities, recognized Christian groups – including Baptists, Orthodox, Anglicans, and Roman Catholics – operate private schools and are able to conduct classes on Christianity. The schools are open to adherents of all religions.

Knowledge of the Quran is required by law for Muslim students in both public and private schools, but it is optional for non-Muslims. Every student, however, must pass an exam in his or her final year of high school that includes mastery of some verses of the Quran in relation to the Arabic language. Islamic religion is an optional subject for university entrance exams for non-Muslim students following the standard curriculum or for Muslim students following international curricula.

The constitution specifies the judiciary shall be divided into civil courts, religious courts, and special courts, with religious courts divided into sharia courts and tribunals of other religious communities. According to the constitution, matters concerning personal status, which include religious affiliation, marriage, divorce, child custody, and inheritance, are under the jurisdiction of religious courts. Matters of personal status in which the parties are Muslim fall within the exclusive jurisdiction of the sharia courts. A personal or family status case in which one party is Muslim and the other is non-Muslim is heard by a civil court unless both

parties agree to use a sharia court. Per the constitution, matters of personal status of non-Muslims whose religion the government officially recognizes are under the jurisdiction of denomination-specific courts of religious communities. Such courts exist for the Greek Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Melkite Catholic, Armenian Orthodox, Coptic, Syrian Orthodox, and Anglican communities. According to the law, members of recognized denominations lacking their own courts must take their cases to civil courts, which, in principle, follow the rules and beliefs of the litigants' denomination in deciding cases, unless both parties to a case agree to use a specific religious court. There are no tribunals for atheists or adherents of nonrecognized religious groups. Such individuals must request a civil court to hear their case.

The Office of the Supreme (Sharia) Justice appoints sharia judges, while each recognized non-Muslim religious community selects the structure and members of its own tribunal. The law stipulates the cabinet must ratify the procedures of each Christian ecclesiastical court. All judicial nominations must be approved by a royal decree.

According to the constitution, sharia courts also exercise jurisdiction with respect to cases concerning "blood money" (Diya) in which the two parties are Muslims or one of the parties is not a Muslim and the two parties consent to the jurisdiction of the sharia courts. Sharia courts also exercise jurisdiction with regard to matters pertaining to Islamic awqaf, or endowments. Muslims are also subject to the jurisdiction of sharia courts on civil matters not addressed by civil status legislation.

Sharia courts do not recognize converts from Islam as falling under the jurisdiction of their new religious community's laws in matters of personal status. Sharia court judges may annul the marriages of converts, transfer child custody to a nonparent Muslim family member or declare the children "wards of the state," and convey an individual's property rights to Muslim family members.

According to sharia, marriages between a Muslim woman and a non-Muslim man are not permitted; the man must convert to Islam for the marriage to be considered legal. If a Christian woman converts to Islam while married to a Christian man, her husband must also convert for their marriage to remain legal. There is no legal provision for civil marriage or divorce for members of nonrecognized religious groups. Members of nonregistered Christian groups, as well as members of groups registered as associations, may obtain marriage certificates from the Anglican

Church (or from another Christian church), which they then may take to the Civil Status Bureau to receive their government marriage certificates.

Sharia governs all matters relating to family law involving Muslims or the children of a Muslim father. If a Muslim husband and non-Muslim wife are divorced, the wife loses custody of the children when they reach seven years of age. Minor children of male citizens who convert to Islam are considered Muslims and are not legally allowed to reconvert to their father's prior religion or convert to any other religion. In accordance with sharia, adult children of a man who has converted to Islam become ineligible to inherit from their father if they do not also convert to Islam, unless the father's will states otherwise. 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 the state does not recognize their religion.

National identification cards issued since May 2016 do not list religion, but religious affiliation is contained in records embedded in the card's electronic chip and remains on file in other government records. Passports are no longer issued listing religion. Atheists and agnostics must list the religious affiliation of their families as their own. Per the ban on conversion from Islam under sharia, converts from Islam to Christianity are not allowed to change their religion on the electronic records. Converts from Christianity to Islam may change their religion on their civil documents such as family book, and on electronic records.

According to the electoral law, Christians are allotted nine of the 130 seats in parliament (6.9 percent). Christians may not run for the remaining 121 seats. No seats are reserved for adherents of other minority religious groups. The government classification of Druze as Muslims permits them to hold office.

The country is a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

Government Practices

Converts to Christianity from Islam continued to report security officials interrogated them about their religious beliefs and practices as part of the government's effort to place obstacles to conversion from Islam. Some converts to Christianity from Islam reported they continued to worship in secret to avoid scrutiny by security officials. Multiple converts from Islam to Christianity reported government officials generally refused to change religion on official documents from Islam to any other religion. Accordingly, the converts' religious

practice did not match their official religion, opening them up to claims of apostasy and personal status issues, including marriage, divorce, and inheritance.

Members of religious groups who were unable to obtain religious divorces continued to convert to another Christian denomination or to Islam to divorce legally, according to reports from religious leaders and the Ministry of Justice. The chief of the Office of the Supreme (Sharia) Justice reportedly continued to try to ensure that Christians wanting to convert to Islam did not have a pending divorce case at the Christian tribunal courts to prevent them from converting for the sole purpose of obtaining a legal divorce. The department reportedly imposed an interview requirement for converts to Islam to determine whether their conversion reflected a genuine religious belief.

The government continued to monitor sermons at mosques and to require preachers to refrain from political commentary, which the government deemed could instigate social or political unrest, and to counter radicalization. During the year, the authorities began disseminating themes and recommended texts for sermons for all imams. Imams who violated these rules continued to risk fines and a ban from preaching. There continued to be unofficial mosques operating outside Ministry of Awqaf control in many cities, as well as imams outside of government employment who preached without Ministry of Awqaf supervision.

During the year, the Office of the Supreme (Sharia) Justice recorded one apostasy complaint, which was filed in a sharia court but immediately dismissed when the court found the allegations were based on a family dispute without evidence of apostasy.

The government policy of not recognizing the Bahai Faith continued, but the government continued to allow Bahais to practice their religion and included them in interfaith events. Sharia courts and the courts of other recognized religions continued not to issue to Bahais the marriage certificates required to transfer citizenship to a foreign spouse or to register for government health insurance and social security. The Department of Civil Status and Passports also continued not to recognize marriages conducted by Bahai assemblies, but it issued family books (a national registration record issued to every head of family) to Bahais, allowing them to register their children, except in cases of marriages between a Bahai man and a Bahai woman erroneously registered as Muslim. In those cases, the children were considered illegitimate and were not issued birth certificates or included in the family and subsequently were unable to obtain citizenship or register for school.

In October the Governor of Amman cancelled a Bahai-hosted event because of stated concerns the event might incite terrorist attacks against the Bahai community. According to Bahai statements, the event was part of a worldwide bicentennial event and honoring “Harmony Among Religions,” scheduled on private property, and the guest list included senior government officials.

Other nonrecognized religious groups reported they continued to operate schools and hospitals, and hold meetings if they were low profile.

According to observers, religious groups with the rights and privileges associated with membership in the CCL guarded this status, and fostered a degree of competition among other religious groups hoping to attain membership. Despite efforts to alter their status, some evangelical Christian groups remained unrecognized either as denominations or as associations. Leaders from some CCL-affiliated churches expressed concerns over “recruitment efforts” against their members by evangelical churches.

Security forces confirmed they devoted extra resources to protect Christian neighborhoods and churches for holidays and special events. Christian leaders said they regarded this presence part of the government effort to provide additional security at public gathering places, including security for religious worshippers. The church leaders stated they especially appreciated the extra protection during religious holidays and large events.

Some Christian leaders continued to express concern the CCL did not meet regularly and lacked the capacity to manage the affairs of both recognized and nonrecognized Christian groups effectively and fairly, especially in relation to their daily lives. Most CCL leaders remained based in Jerusalem.

Druze continued to worship at mosques and at social halls belonging to the Druze community. Druze continued to report discrimination in reaching high positions in government and official departments. A Druze community representative did not consider the January appointment of a Druze foreign minister in the current government as adequate inclusion of Druze in the government. No Druze person reached a military rank higher than brigadier.

Members of non-Muslim religious groups continued to report occasional threats by the government to arrest them for violating the public order if they proselytized Muslims. Security officials refused to renew residency permits for some foreign

religious leaders living in the country after raising concerns their activities could incite extremist attacks.

The government continued to permit non-Muslim members of the armed forces to practice their religion.

There continued to be two recognized Bahai cemeteries registered in the name of the Bahai Faith through a special arrangement previously agreed between the group and the government. Bahai leaders reported they continued to be unable to register other properties under the name of the Bahai Faith but remained able to register property under the names of individual Bahais. In doing so, the Bahai leaders said, they continued to have to pay new registration fees whenever they transferred property from one person to another at the death of the registered owner, a process constituting a large financial burden.

The Ministry of Education rolled back revisions to the school curriculum after widespread complaints from teachers unions, parents groups, and Muslim organizations. In 2016 the Ministry of Education announced revisions to the school curriculum at the beginning of the academic year, which included pictures of women without head coverings and mention of the coexistence of Islam with other religions in textbooks. The media reported the changes were part of a government strategy to combat radical Islam, but parents' and teachers' groups stated the changes were distancing students from Islamic values and asserted it "promoted normalization of relations with Israel." Education reform advocates said the revisions did not go far enough towards promoting tolerance and inclusion. The new curriculum continued the past practice of not including mention of the Holocaust.

The government continued to record Druze as Muslims on civil documents identifying the bearer's religious community, without public objection from the Druze.

Four Christians served as ministers in the 29-member cabinet. A few Christians also achieved the rank of general in the military, but Muslims continued to hold most senior security positions.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Interfaith religious leaders reported an increase in online hate speech directed towards religious minorities and those who advocated religious moderation,

frequently through social media. Authorities detained two individuals for allegedly posting threats on social media against liberal columnists who were receiving continuous threats after the killing of writer Nahed Hattar in 2016. The cases remained pending at the end of the year. The harshest criticism targeted converts from Islam to other religions. Religious minorities expressed concerns some Muslim leaders preached intolerance. Christians reported they self-segregated into Christian enclaves to escape social pressure and threats. A Christian leader from Karak said many Christians were choosing to move to Amman.

Converts from Islam to Christianity reported continued social ostracism, threats, and physical and verbal abuse, including beatings, insults, and intimidation, along with government surveillance. Some converts from Islam to Christianity reported they continued to worship in secret because of the social stigma they faced as converts. Some converts from Islam reported persistent and credible threats from family members concerned with protecting traditional honor.

Church leaders continued to report incidents of violence and discrimination against religious converts and individuals in interfaith romantic relationships. A convert from Islam to Christianity fled the country after she received credible threats from family members. Individuals in interfaith romantic relationships continued to report ostracism and, in some cases, feuds among family members and violence toward the individuals involved.

Following a terrorist attack in January at a nightclub in Istanbul in which Jordanians were killed, social media commentators stated the victims should not be honored as martyrs because they visited an establishment some considered immoral. In contrast to some political and societal leaders, the country's religious leaders largely did not condemn the attack. Authorities arrested online commentators who criticized the victims, and media outlets underscored the risk of prosecution under provisions of the cybercrimes law and terrorism law for condemning the victims.

Riyad Ismail Abdullah was convicted of murder in December 2016 for the September 2016 killing of writer Nahed Hattar and executed in March. Abdullah shot Hattar when he appeared at an Amman courthouse to face charges of inciting sectarian strife and insulting religion. Hattar had shared a Facebook post (which he had not authored) with a cartoon personifying God. A public memorial service was held for Hattar in September on the one-year anniversary of his killing. Following Hattar's killing, the press reported there was a spike in sectarian rhetoric in online postings by the public. Some of the postings referred to Hattar's

Christian heritage and were directed against the Christian community. Media reports stated the Public Security Directorate referred dozens of cases of spreading hate speech related to the cartoon and Hattar's killing to the judiciary for prosecution under the cybercrimes law and the terrorism law. The media reported police arrested at least 16 individuals, two of whom were individuals who allegedly posted threats on social media against liberal columnists who were receiving continuous threats after Hattar's death. These cases were pending at year's end.

Editorial cartoons, articles, and postings on social media continued to present negative images of Jews and to conflate anti-Israel sentiment with anti-Semitic sentiment. The government continued not to take action with regard to anti-Semitic material appearing in the media, despite laws that prohibit such material.

The Royal Institute for Interfaith Studies (RIIFS), Royal Islamic Strategic Studies Centre, Royal Aal al-Bayt Institute, Interfaith Coexistence Research Center, Community Ecumenical Center, and Catholic Center for Media Studies continued to sponsor initiatives promoting collaboration between religious groups. In September RIIFS hosted a week-long seminar on "Moses in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam," convening scholars from around the world. Bahais continued to be included by other religious groups in interfaith conferences, religious celebrations, and World Interfaith Harmony Week in February, which included activities across the governorates and the armed forces.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

The Ambassador, Charge d'Affaires, and other embassy officers continued to engage with government officials at all levels, including the minister of awqaf, to raise the rights of religious minorities, the protection of cultural resources, and the inclusion of interfaith tolerance in the new educational curriculum. In October the Department of State Special Advisor on Minority Communities in Near East and South and Central Asia met with religious leaders from the Christian, Druze, Bahai, and Muslim communities to discuss their concerns. During meetings with representatives of the National Committee for Human Rights, Prince Hassan bin Talal, and the Royal Institute for Interfaith Studies, he discussed inclusive education reform, ways to address tensions among religious communities, and registration challenges for new Christian churches.

The Ambassador met with Muslim scholars and Christian leaders in January to encourage greater interfaith dialogue, the protection of the rights of religious

minorities, and the promotion of interfaith tolerance in the education system. Embassy officers continued to meet frequently with representatives of religious communities, nonrecognized groups, religious converts, and interfaith institutions such as the Royal Institute for Interfaith Studies to discuss their ability to practice their religion freely.

The embassy continued its sponsorship of the participation of religious scholars, teachers, and leaders in exchange programs in the United States designed to promote religious tolerance and a better understanding of the right to practice one's faith as a fundamental human right and source of stability.