

JORDAN 2019 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. It stipulates there shall be no discrimination based on religion. It does not address the right to convert to another faith, nor are there penalties under civil law for doing so. According to the constitution, matters concerning the personal and family status of Muslims come under the jurisdiction of sharia courts. Under sharia, converts from Islam are still considered Muslims and are subject to sharia but are regarded as apostates. Seven of the 11 recognized Christian groups have religious courts to address such personal status matters for their members. In April parliament ratified amendments to the Personal Status Law (PSL), stipulating that mothers, regardless of religious background, should retain custody of their children until age 18. The government continued to deny official recognition to some religious groups, including Baha’is and Jehovah’s Witnesses. On August 1, the government temporarily closed Aaron’s Tomb, a religious site near Petra popular with tourists, after photographs and videos appeared on social media showing a group of Jewish tourists praying at the site. Members of some unregistered groups continued to face problems registering their marriages and the religious affiliation of their children, and also renewing their residency permits. The government continued to monitor mosque sermons and required that preachers refrain from political commentary and adhere to approved themes and texts during Friday sermons. Converts to Christianity from Islam reported that security officials continued to question them to determine their “true” religious beliefs and practices. Security forces increased their presence in Christian areas, especially during special events and holidays. Several Christian leaders said they regarded this presence as part of a government effort to provide additional security at public gathering places, including security for worshippers. A few members of the Christian community, however, said they felt intimidated and targeted by these extra precautionary measures.

Interfaith religious leaders reported continued online hate speech directed towards religious minorities and moderates, frequently through social media. Social media users also defended interfaith tolerance, condemning videos and online posts that criticized Christianity or tried to discourage interfaith dialogue. Some converts to Christianity from Islam continued to report ostracism as well as physical and verbal abuse from their families and communities, and some worshipped in secret as a result of the social stigma they faced. Some converts reported persistent and

credible threats from family members concerned with protecting traditional honor. The Jordanian Philosophical Society hosted a lecture by physics professor Hisham Ghassib in which he described Judaism as a “primitive” and “despicable” religion. Observers reported occasional friction between Christian denominations officially recognized by the government and evangelical churches that are not.

The Charge d’Affaires and other U.S. embassy officers continued to engage with government officials at all levels, including the minister of awqaf, grand mufti, minister of foreign affairs, and officials at the Royal Hashemite Court, to raise the rights of religious minorities, the protection of cultural resources, interfaith tolerance, and the legal status of religious workers and volunteers. Embassy officers also engaged with Muslim scholars and Christian community leaders to promote interfaith tolerance and dialogue. The embassy supported exchange programs promoting religious tolerance, as well as civil society programs to preserve the cultural heritage of religious minorities.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the population at 10.7 million (midyear 2019 estimate). According to U.S. government estimates, Muslims, virtually all of whom are Sunni, make up 97.2 percent of the population. Some church leaders estimate that Christians make up approximately 1.8 percent of the country’s population. Groups constituting less than 1 percent of the population include Buddhists, Baha’is, Hindus, and Druze (who are treated as Muslims by the government). According to the Royal Institute for Interfaith Studies (RIIFS), there is also a small community (consisting of a few families) of Zoroastrians. The Ministry of Labor issued more than 300,000 work permits to foreign workers during the year, but civil society sources note that the number of migrant workers exceeds 800,000. Most of the migrant workers are from Egypt, South and East Asia, and sub-Saharan Africa. Migrant workers from sub-Saharan Africa and South and East Asia are often Christian or Hindu. There are more than 744,000 refugees registered with the UN High Commissioner for Refugees from 57 countries of origin, including more than 654,000 Syrians and 66,000 Iraqis. The Syrian and Iraqi refugee populations are mostly Sunni Muslim. Shia Muslims and Christians account for less than one third of the Iraqi refugee population.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

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. It stipulates there shall be no discrimination in the rights and duties of citizens on grounds of religion and states the king must be a Muslim. The constitution allows for religious courts, including sharia courts for Muslims and ecclesiastical courts for Christian denominations recognized by the government. According to the General Ifta’ Department, in adjudicating personal status cases, sharia courts follow the Hanafi school of Islamic jurisprudence.

The constitution does not address the right to convert to another faith, nor are there penalties under civil law for doing so. The constitution and the law, however, allow sharia courts to determine civil status affairs for Muslims; these courts do not recognize converts from Islam to other religions. Under sharia, converts from Islam are still considered Muslims and are subject to sharia but are regarded as apostates. 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 case of a will that states otherwise. Any member of society may file an apostasy complaint against such individuals before the Sharia Public Prosecution. The Sharia Public Prosecution consults with the Council of Church Leaders (CCL), a government advisory body comprising the heads of the country’s 11 officially recognized Christian denominations, before converting a Christian to Islam, in order to avoid conversions for purposes of marriage and/or divorces only, and not religious conviction. The penal code contains articles criminalizing acts such as incitement of hatred, blasphemy against Abrahamic faiths, undermining the regime, or portraying citizens in a manner that violates their dignity. The penal code criminalizes insulting the Prophet Muhammad, punishable by one to three years’ imprisonment. The law also provides a term of imprisonment not exceeding three months or a fine not exceeding 20 Jordanian dinars (\$28) for anyone who publishes anything that offends religious feelings or beliefs.

Authorities may prosecute individuals who proselytize Muslims 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 (\$71).

Islamic religious groups are granted recognition through the constitution and do not need to register with the government. 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 they 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.

Religious groups not recognized as denominations or associations lack legal status and may not undertake basic administrative tasks such as opening bank accounts, purchasing real estate, or hiring staff. Individuals may exercise such activities on behalf of the unrecognized group, however. To register as a recognized religious denomination, the 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 Ministry of the Interior (MOI) and the CCL. Although the practice is not explicitly mandated by the law, church leaders have stated that the CCL must endorse recognition for new Christian groups prior to the prime minister’s approval. To achieve official recognition as denominations, Christian groups must be recommended by the MOI and approved by the cabinet. 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.

An annex to the 2014 Law for Councils of Christian Denominations lists 11 officially recognized Christian religious groups: Greek Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Armenian Orthodox, Melkite Catholic, Anglican, Maronite Catholic, Lutheran, Syrian Orthodox, Seventh-day Adventist, United Pentecostal, and Coptic. In 2018 five additional evangelical Christian denominations, formerly registered under the Ministry of Justice, were recognized by the MOI as associations, but none have been permitted to establish an ecclesiastical court: the Free Evangelical Church, Church of the Nazarene, Assemblies of God, Christian and Missionary Alliance, and Baptist Church. The government granted legal status as an association to The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in 2018.

The CCL consists of the heads of the country's 11 historically 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. Religious groups that do not have representatives on the CCL handle administrative tasks through the ministry relevant to the task. Nonrecognized Christian groups do not have representatives on the CCL, 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 the Islamic *awqaf* (religious endowments). Per this provision of the law, the Ministry of Awqaf Islamic Affairs and Holy Places (Ministry of Awqaf) manages mosques, appoints imams, pays mosque staff salaries, manages Islamic clergy training centers, and subsidizes certain mosque-sponsored activities, such as holiday celebrations and religious observances. Other Islamic institutions are the Supreme (Sharia) Justice Department, which is headed by the Office of the Supreme (Sharia) Justice (OSJ) and is in charge of the sharia courts, and the General Ifta' Department, which issues fatwas.

The government requires imams to adhere to officially prescribed themes and texts for Friday sermons. 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 the Ministry of Awqaf. 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 be given a fine not to exceed 20 Jordanian dinars (\$28).

The law forbids any Islamic cleric from issuing a fatwa unless authorized by an official committee headed by the grand mufti in the General Ifta' Department. This department is independent from the Ministry of Awqaf, with the rank of mufti being equal to that of a minister.

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 it imposes a fine on violators of up to 20,000 Jordanian dinars (\$28,200).

By law, public schools provide Islamic religious instruction as part of the basic national curriculum; 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 which according to the legal code includes 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.” To operate a school, religious institutions must receive permission from the Ministry of Education, which ensures the curriculum meets national standards. The ministry does not oversee religious courses if religious groups offer them at their places of worship. In several cities, Christian groups – including Baptists, Orthodox, Anglicans, and Roman Catholics – operate private schools and are able to conduct classes on Christianity. Private schools, both nonreligious and religious, 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 is optional for non-Muslims. Every student, however, must pass an Arabic language exam in their final year of high school that includes linguistic mastery of some verses of the Quran. The Islamic religion is an optional subject for secondary education certificate 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 recognized 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 the 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 religious groups lacking their own courts may 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 OSJ appoints sharia judges, while each recognized non-Islamic religious community selects the structure and members of its own tribunal. The law stipulates the cabinet must ratify the procedures of each non-Islamic religious (known as 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” (*diyya*) 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*. 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 and transfer child custody to a Muslim nonparent 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 to Islam for their marriage to remain legal. If a Christian man converts to Islam while married to a Christian woman, the wife does not need to convert to Islam for the 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 any recognized Christian denomination such as the Anglican 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. Historically, if a Muslim husband and non-Muslim wife divorce, the wife would lose custody of the children when they reached seven years of age. In April parliament ratified amendments to the PSL, stipulating that mothers, regardless of religious background, should retain custody of their children until age 18. 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. (Like citizenship, religion is transmitted only via the father). 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 the PSL, which mostly follows Islamic legal provisions regarding inheritance if no equivalent inheritance guidelines are codified in their religion or if the state does not recognize their religion. In practice, Christian ecclesiastical courts use sharia-based rules to adjudicate inheritance.

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 issued since May 2016 do not list religion. Atheists and agnostics must list the religious affiliation of their fathers 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 electronic records. Converts from Christianity to Islam must change their religion on their civil documents such as family books (a national registration record issued to every head of family) and on electronic records.

According to the electoral law, Christians are allocated nine of 130 parliamentary seats. Christians may not run for additional seats. No seats are reserved for adherents of other minority religious groups. The law stipulates that Muslims must hold all parliamentary seats not specifically reserved for Christians. There are no reserved seats for the Druze population. The government classifies Druze as Muslims and permits them to hold office as Muslims.

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

Government Practices

On August 1, the minister of awqaf temporarily closed Aaron's Tomb, a religious site near Petra popular with tourists, after photographs and videos appeared on social media showing a group of Jewish tourists praying at the site. In an August 2 statement, a local tourism official said the government would not allow non-Islamic religious ceremonies at the site and that the tomb had nothing to do with Judaism historically or archaeologically. Upon reopening the site to non-Israeli visitors after nine days, the minister of awqaf issued a statement calling on visitors to obey all rules and regulations at the shrine. Following bilateral discussions between Jordan and Israel in November, an announcement was made on December

1 that the site would reopen to Israeli tourists in prior coordination and with on-site guides and security.

Converts to Islam from Christianity continued to report security officials questioning them about their religious beliefs and practices, as well as surveillance, as part of the government's effort to prevent conversions of convenience for the purpose of receiving advantageous divorce or inheritance benefits. Some converts to Christianity from Islam reported they continued to worship in secret to avoid scrutiny by security officials. Because of the sharia ban on conversion, government officials generally refused to change the religion listed 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 involving marriage, divorce, and inheritance.

The government's Media Commission regulates the publishing and distribution of all books and media. If the Media Commission deems that passages "violate public norms and values, are religiously offensive, or are insulting" to the king, it can request a court order to prohibit the distribution of the book. During the year, the commission banned distribution of 55 books for insulting religion as well as displaying pornographic images and promoting homosexuality.

Members of religious groups who were unable to obtain religious divorces converted 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 OSJ continued to ensure that Christians wanting to convert to Islam did not have a pending divorce case at one of the Christian religious courts to prevent them from converting for the sole purpose of obtaining a legal divorce. The OSJ continued to enforce the interview requirement for converts to Islam, introduced in 2017, to determine whether their conversion reflected a genuine religious belief.

The Ministry of Awqaf continued to monitor sermons at mosques and required that preachers refrain from political commentary. Authorities continued to disseminate themes and required imams to choose from a list of recommended texts for sermons. Imams who violated these rules risked being fined or banned from preaching. Unofficial mosques continued to operate outside Ministry of Awqaf control in many cities, and imams outside of government employment preached without Ministry of Awqaf supervision. According to the grand mufti, the Ministry of Awqaf discovered some unregistered imams leading prayers in mosques in 2018. In these cases, the government ordered all attendees and imams to cease their activities and gather in a designated mosque in their area for the

Friday sermons led by a registered imam. In light of concerns expressed by religious minorities regarding intolerant preaching by some Muslims, the government called in 2018 for the consolidation of Friday prayers into central mosques over which they had more oversight, a practice that was implemented partially in major cities. During the year, the Ministry of Awqaf allowed smaller mosques to continue Friday sermons along with their area's central mosque after identifying accessibility and commuting difficulties, especially for the elderly.

The Ministry of Awqaf continued to provide official government support for religious travel for Muslims. During the year, in support of the Hajj pilgrimage, the ministry implemented an electronic tracking system for buses carrying pilgrims to follow up on vehicle breakdowns and ensure carriers met safety standards. The government received a quota from the Saudi government of approximately 7,000 visas for the Hajj, excluding guides, controllers, and drivers. The government assigned the visas to citizens based on military or government service, age (the elderly are granted preference), and a national lottery.

During the year, expatriate religious volunteers from the evangelical Christian community continued to report bureaucratic delays in the renewal of residency permits. In 2018 the government began enforcing a new residency policy to limit the ability of churches to sponsor religious volunteers for residency. Observers suggested that the volunteers were illegally proselytizing Muslims. Authorities previously allowed the churches to obtain residency status for religious volunteers with the approval of the MOI and a letter of sponsorship from the church. Volunteers now obtained additional approvals, including from the Ministry of Labor, lengthening the average renewal process by several months, according to church officials.

The government policy of not recognizing the Baha'i Faith continued, but the government continued to allow Baha'is to privately practice their religion and included them in interfaith events. Sharia courts and the courts of other recognized religions continued not to issue Baha'is 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 Baha'i assemblies, but it issued family books to Baha'is, allowing them to register their children, except in cases of marriages between a Baha'i man and a Baha'i woman erroneously registered as Muslim. In those cases, the children were considered illegitimate and were not issued birth certificates or included in family books and subsequently were unable to obtain citizenship or register for school. The Baha'is were able to obtain some

documents such as marriage certificates through the civil courts, although they reportedly were required to pay fees that sometimes amounted to more than 500 Jordanian dinars (\$710) for documents normally available for five Jordanian dinars (\$7) through religious courts. Kamel Abu Jaber, the director of the Royal Institute of Interfaith Studies and former foreign minister, stated in an August report on Al-Monitor, a U.S. website focusing on Middle East news, that a law recognizing the Baha'i Faith would be hard to pass in parliament. Abu Jaber said that during his tenure as foreign minister, he relayed a request from the Baha'i community for official recognition. According to Abu Jaber, the government declined to take action, fearing reactions in both the parliament and across society.

There continued to be two recognized cemeteries registered in the name of the Baha'i Faith through a special arrangement previously agreed between the group and the government. Baha'i leaders reported they continued to be unable to register other properties under the name of the Baha'i Faith but remained able to register property under the names of individual Baha'is. In doing so, the Baha'i 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 that created a large financial burden. Baha'i leaders said they were using the civil courts to challenge their group's property registration restrictions. The Baha'i community's request for religious exemptions for property registration fees remained pending.

The government continued to deny official recognition to other religious groups, including the Jehovah's Witnesses. Other nonrecognized religious groups reported that they continued to operate schools and hospitals and that they were able to hold services and meetings if they were low profile.

Security forces confirmed they devoted extra resources to protect Christian neighborhoods and churches for holidays and special events, increasing security even further after a 2018 attack targeting security forces near a music festival outside the predominantly Christian town of Fuhais. Several Christian leaders said they regarded this presence as part of the government's effort to provide additional security at public gathering places, including for religious worshippers. These church leaders stated they appreciated the extra protection during religious holidays and at large events, although a few members of the Christian community said they felt intimidated and targeted by these extra measures.

Religious minorities, including Christians and Druze, continued to serve in parliament and as cabinet ministers. Christians served as deputy prime minister,

cabinet ministers, senators, and ambassadors. There was one Druze cabinet member.

Druze continued to worship and socialize in buildings belonging to the Druze community. The government continued to record Druze as Muslims on civil documents identifying the bearer's religious affiliation, without public objection from the Druze. Druze continued to report discrimination hindered their coreligionists from reaching high positions in government and official departments.

The government continued to permit non-Muslim members of the armed forces to practice their religion. Christians and Druze achieved general officer rank in the military, but Muslims continued to hold most senior positions across the security and intelligence services.

Members of non-Muslim religious groups continued to report occasional threats by the government to arrest them for disrupting public order if they proselytized Muslims. Security officials continued to refuse to renew residency permits for some foreign religious leaders and religious volunteers after raising concerns their activities could incite extremist attacks, according to multiple nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). Others were refused on the basis of proselytization accusations, while additional requirements were imposed for residency renewals for religious volunteers in general.

The Ministry of Education did not undertake school curriculum revisions during the year, following a rescindment of curriculum revisions that met with resistance in 2017. The changes were intended to promote tolerance, but parents and teachers' groups stated that the changes were distancing students from Islamic values and promoted normalization of relations with Israel. The curriculum continued the past practice of omitting mention of the Holocaust.

Amendments to the cybercrimes law remain pending with parliament. The new amendments define hate speech as "any statement or act intended to provoke sectarian or racial tension or strife among different elements of the nation."

On October 7, King Abdullah presented awards to a number of leading international Islamic scholars at the 18th General Conference of the Royal Aal al-Bayt Institute for Islamic Thought in recognition of their efforts to promote religious understanding and interfaith dialogue. On May 7, the king announced plans to help fund the restoration of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem

from his personal funds. Church leaders in Jerusalem previously could not decide on funding the renovation because of competing Christian claims regarding administration of the site. In April the king hosted a number of Muslim and Christian religious leaders at the World Interfaith Harmony Week prize ceremony.

On March 29, King Abdullah received the “Lamp of Peace” award from the Catholic Franciscan order in Assisi, Italy. German Chancellor Angela Merkel, the 2018 honoree, presented the king with the award. The Franciscans bestowed the award to the king for promoting human rights and interfaith dialogue, as well as his support of Middle East peace and Syrian refugees. In his acceptance speech, the king stated, “The principles of coexistence and interfaith harmony are deeply embedded in Jordan’s heritage.” He added, “Our country is home to a historic Christian community. All our citizens actively share in building our strong nation. Indeed, Christians have been part of Middle East societies for thousands of years and are vital to the future of our region.”

A London-based NGO, the Minority Rights Group, noted on its website that the acceptance of Christianity in the midst of a Muslim majority has been the “norm” in the country’s modern history and that the government has been “overwhelmingly tolerant” of its Christian minority.

The National Center for Human Rights, a quasi-independent institution established by law, received both government and international funding. The prime minister nominates its board of trustees, and the king ratifies their appointment by royal decree. In August a new board of trustees was appointed, to include Islamists, former ministers, former judges, current members of parliament, religious leaders, and civil society representatives.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Converts from Islam to Christianity reported continued social ostracism, threats, and physical and verbal abuse, including beatings, insults, and intimidation, from family members, neighbors, and community or tribal members. Some reported they worshipped in secret because of the social stigma they faced as converts, while others reported persistent and credible threats of violence from family members protecting traditional honor. According to international NGOs, female converts from Islam were particularly vulnerable to harassment. NGOs also reported cases of forced marriage to Muslims by female converts from Islam in order to “retain family honor.” Church leaders continued to report incidents of violence and discrimination against religious converts and persons in interfaith

romantic relationships; the latter continued to report ostracism and, in some cases, feuds among family members and violence toward those involved. Some converts from Islam expressed interest in resettlement abroad due to discrimination and threats of violence. Converts from Christianity also reported social stigma from the church and Christian society. Nonbelievers reported societal intolerance and discrimination.

Religious leaders reported continuing online hate speech directed towards religious minorities and those who advocated religious moderation, frequently through social media. A well-known religious scholar and television host reported such negative reactions on social media to his televised programs, in which he advocated religious moderation and interfaith understanding.

On September 7, in an open lecture hosted by the Jordanian Philosophical Society, physics professor Hisham Ghassib described Judaism as a “primitive” and “despicable” religion, adding that the concept of a Jewish nation was a “myth.” A video of the lecture posted on social media received a muted local response, but numerous Israeli newspapers criticized the remarks. The government did not respond to the criticism or issue an official condemnation.

Criticism online and in social media continued to target 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.

Observers reported occasional friction between Christian denominations on the CCL and evangelical churches not recognized by the government. Leaders from some CCL-affiliated churches said there were “recruitment efforts” against their members by evangelical churches and that evangelical churches were disrupting interfaith harmony and the CCL’s relationship with the government and security services.

During the year, the RIIFS hosted two events on religious pluralism and interfaith understanding. RIIFS also produced manuals for imams and female religious leaders focused on human rights and religious freedom. The Royal Islamic Strategic Studies Center, Royal Aal al-Bayt Institute, Jordanian Interfaith Coexistence Research Center, Community Ecumenical Center, and Catholic Center for Media Studies also continued to sponsor initiatives promoting collaboration among religious groups. Baha’is 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 country and within the armed forces.

In an August report, Arab Barometer, an international research consortium focusing on the Middle East and North Africa, found that only 22 percent of individuals between ages 15 and 29 in the country identified as religious. This represented a decline of 7 percentage points since the last survey in 2017. In a December 2019 poll, Arab Barometer also found a decline in trust in Islamist parties since 2013.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

The Charge d'Affaires and other embassy officers continued to engage with government officials at all levels, including the minister of awqaf, grand mufti, minister of foreign affairs, and officials at the Royal Hashemite Court, to raise the rights of religious minorities, the protection of cultural resources, interfaith tolerance, and the legal status of expatriate religious workers and volunteers. In May the Charge d'Affaires hosted an interfaith iftar to highlight religious diversity, increase engagement with civil society about tolerance and religious freedom, and build partnerships to advance minority rights. The gathering brought together a diverse set of religious leaders, including evangelical Christian pastors, the director of the Baha'i Faith community, heads of NGOs specializing in interfaith cooperation, sharia judges, and the grand mufti. In August the Charge hosted a luncheon for participants in the July Ministerial to Advance Religious Freedom in Washington, D.C., to hear feedback from the conference and discuss general religious freedom trends in the country.

Embassy officers continued to meet frequently with representatives of religious communities, including nonrecognized groups, religious converts, and interfaith institutions such as RIIFS, to discuss the ability to practice 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 understanding. The embassy awarded a two-year, \$265,000 grant to upgrade a revenue-generating cheese production business in Karak operated by women from religious minorities. The embassy continued to administer a \$750,000 grant awarded in 2018 for a project to preserve religious and cultural heritage, focusing on protecting the country's interfaith tradition and highlighting the heritage of religious minorities. The U.S. NGO Search for Common Ground was implementing the project, building interfaith youth

coalitions in six communities to promote and preserve religious heritage sites. The project aims to empower local communities, increase mutual respect, preserve religious-cultural heritage, and foster interreligious dialogue and cooperation. The embassy used social media posts to promote religious tolerance and mark religious holidays, including through posting video messages. The Charge d’Affaires appeared in a video for Eid al-Fitr marking the end of Ramadan that showed her participating in the tradition of handing out date-filled cookies to friends and colleagues. In mid-December, dozens of embassy staff and their family members participated in the filming of a Christmas greeting video that was disseminated on social media.