



Religion

Population

Area

- Muslims : **94.5%**
- Agnostics : **2.5%**
- Christians : **2.2%**
- Others : **0.8%**

7,748,000

89,318 Km²

Legal framework on freedom of religion and actual application

Since it was established, the Kingdom of Jordan has been ruled by members of the Hashemite dynasty from Mecca. The Jordanian rulers claim to be direct descendants of the Prophet Mohammed. From 1948, Jordan controlled East Jerusalem and the West Bank until Israel conquered the territories in 1967, the latter was the reason why many Palestinian refugees went to the Kingdom. A considerable number of Palestinian refugees had already gone to the Kingdom after the establishment of Israel. Nowadays, the majority of its citizens are of Palestinian origin. Only a minority belong to the traditional Bedouin inhabitants of the area. In 1994, Jordan made a peace treaty with Israel. The peace treaty confirms the Jordanian King's rights as Custodian of the Holy Places in East Jerusalem. Relations between Sunni Muslims and Christians in Jordan are usually peaceful. The Christian community praises the Royal Family for fostering a spirit of tolerance. The Catholic Church is present with parishes and institutions such as Caritas Jordan. There are Christian and Hindu migrant workers, mainly from Asia, temporarily living and working in the country.

According to article two of the country's constitution^[1] of 1952, "Islam is the religion of the State". Article six states that "Jordanians shall be equal before the law with no discrimination between them in rights and duties even if they differ in race, language or religion." Article 14 obliges the state to "safeguard the free exercise of the rites of religions and creeds in accordance with the customs observed in the Kingdom, if such is not inconsistent with public order or morality." Article 28e says that "It is a condition for the person who shall ascend the Throne to be a Moslem, [...] and of Moslem parents."

Article 99 establishes civil, religious and special courts. Article 104 divides religious courts into Shari'a courts and the tribunals of other religious communities. All matters related to the personal status of Muslims are regulated by Shari'a law. Christians are subject to their respective ecclesiastical courts. Civil marriage does not exist. A Muslim woman cannot marry a Christian man. If a Christian woman converts to Islam, her Christian husband has to convert too if they want to

remain married; otherwise, they are automatically divorced.

The constitution and laws do not explicitly ban Muslims from converting to another faith, and there are no penalties under civil law for doing so. Nonetheless, by according primacy to Shari'a, which prohibits Muslims from converting to another religion, the government effectively prohibits both conversion from Islam and proselytising for another religion. According to Islamic law, there are consequences for Muslims when they adopt a religion other than Islam. For instance, if someone is convicted of apostasy, the Islamic courts adjudicating matters of personal status have the power to void the person's marriage and deny his or her right to inherit from their spouse and Muslim relatives.

Jordan explicitly criminalises blasphemy. Article 273 of Jordan's Penal Code of 1960 states that any individual who insults the Prophet Mohammed is liable for a term of imprisonment of one to three years^[2]

Christians are represented by quota in Parliament and have access to higher ranks in the government and the army. The proportion of Christians in the country has been declining for half a century, with various estimates indicating that today the figure is just over two percent of the population, down from 20 percent in 1930^[3]

Officially recognised Christian denominations include the Greek Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Greek Catholic (Melkite), Armenian Orthodox, Maronite Catholic, Assyrian, Coptic, Anglican, Lutheran, Seventh-day Adventist and Presbyterian Churches. Some Christian Churches (such as the Free Evangelical Church, Nazarene Church, Assemblies of God, Christian and Missionary Alliance, and The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons) are not officially recognised but registered as "societies". The United Pentecostal and the Jehovah's Witnesses are among the unrecognised Christian denominations which are not registered as "societies". Chaldean and Syriac Christians among Iraqi refugees are referred to as "guests" by the government. The Baptist Church, registered as a "denomination", does not enjoy the full privileges of other registered denominations in the country^[4]

Incidents

On 25th September 2016, prominent Jordanian writer Nahed Hattar was assassinated outside a court in Amman. From a Christian family but known for his atheistic views, Hattar was on trial facing charges of inciting sectarian strife and insulting Islam by sharing an "offensive" cartoon.

The day following his assassination, hundreds of Jordanians, many Christians among them including Church leaders, liberal Muslims and community leaders, demonstrated near the Office of the Prime Minister in the capital Amman. They were asking the government to protect fully the rights and safety of minorities^[5]

Hattar had been arrested a month earlier after posting a cartoon on his Facebook account, titled, "The God of Daesh (Islamic State, IS)" with an IS militant sitting next to two women and asking God to bring him a drink. He removed the cartoon but insisted that he did not intend to insult Islam or question God's divinity in any way. He just wanted to show how the Islamic State "envisions God and heaven".^[6]

Following the execution of a Jordanian Air Force fighter pilot by Daesh militants in 2015, which was not unanimously condemned by all politicians and religious representatives, and at a time when hundreds of Jordanians were already in Iraq and Syria engaged with Islamist groups, the King called for reforming the contents of textbooks^[7]

These reforms were implemented in September 2016, and a number of schoolbooks were modified. But these changes sparked a lot of criticism from teachers as well as parents. These protests led to the establishment of a new evaluation commission and the teachers' union asked its members not to consider the changes and use instead the old textbooks.

Demonstrations and book burnings in front of the Education Ministry were relayed by Jordanian media, eventually reaching the international media. Some parents went so far as to accuse the government of wanting to encourage Jordanians to stop following the Prophet and his teachings. Others argued that the new programme was dictated by the Israelis to weaken the faith of Muslims. As a result, to counteract these changes, some teachers started giving additional

classes in religion.^[8]

In an article that appeared in a UAE paper, the spokesman for the teachers' association declared: "There are hidden powers that want to normalise the curriculum and globalise it so that the next generation will kneel down [succumb] to other cultures and to the enemy as well."^[9]

One of the offensive images shows a man cleaning a house, a crucifix hanging on the wall behind him. Atef al-Numat, a member of the teachers' union, called the changes "a disaster for our children and our values". For him, Jordanian men do not clean their homes, and the crucifix is a "clear message" that "conversion is possible"^[10]

In an interview with the National Catholic Register, Father Nabil Haddad, a Melkite Greek Catholic priest, said that people need to realise that religion must be used to build peace and understanding in the region. Although it is considered to be a holy land, "the mentalities and minds are not the minds of peace and change."^[11] Talking about the new Pope Francis Centre in Amman for inter-religious dialogue, he said that it is meant to give the voice of Christianity. "We want to use this centre as a platform that brings the Good News and hope at a time when there is so much blood, so much killing, and every crime is justified by a certain religious agenda."^[12]

At a meeting held in December 2017, Christian religious and lay leaders said that the Christians of Jordan and Palestine see King Abdallah II, the Custodian of Muslim and Christian holy places in Jerusalem, as their protector.

King Abdallah II met Christian religious leaders from Jordan and Jerusalem at Christmas and the New Year at the site of Jesus's baptism (Bethany beyond the Jordan).^[13]

During a visit to Jordan in May 2017, the Archbishop of Canterbury Justin Welby said: "Christians are the past, present and must be the future"^[14] of the Middle East. He visited refugee camps and met Christian refugees from Iraq and Syria.

Speaking about Syrian refugees, Mohammad Momani, Jordan's Minister for State Media Affairs, said in August 2016 that their overall figure in Jordan is close to 1.3 million, or almost 20 percent of the country's population!^[15]

Prospects for Freedom of Religion

Jordan, in common with many other Islamic countries in the Middle East, does not grant full religious freedom to its citizens. Converts from Islam to Christianity face considerable social resistance and legal consequences, especially in matters of personal status. Churches are also prevented from preaching the Gospel to Muslims or actively pursuing their conversion. The King and other members of the Royal Family are in favour of religious tolerance and have expressed this in words and deeds. The monarch welcomed thousands of Christians from Iraq and Syria to his country. Relations between the traditional, officially registered Churches and the government are excellent. Non-registered Churches face problems, however. A matter of concern is the high number of Jordanian Muslims who are in favour of radical Islamic ideas or who have joined jihadist groups in neighbouring Syria.

Endnotes / Sources

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