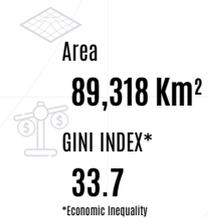
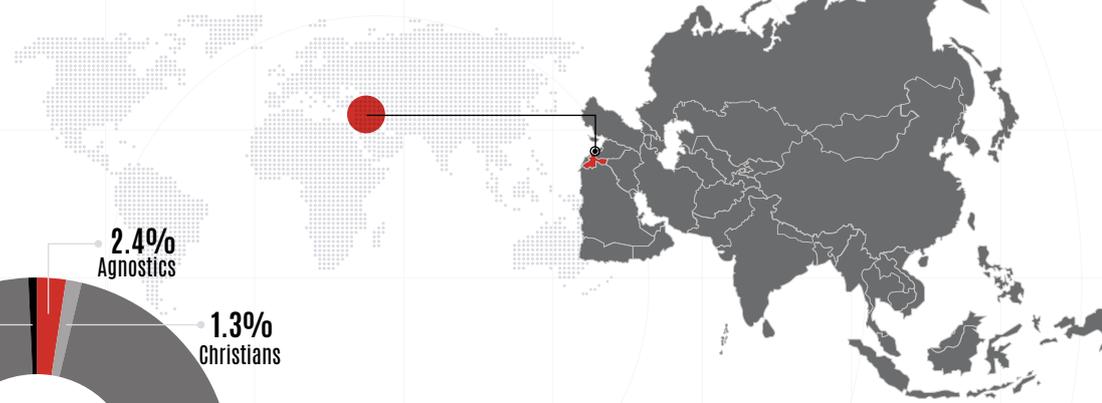
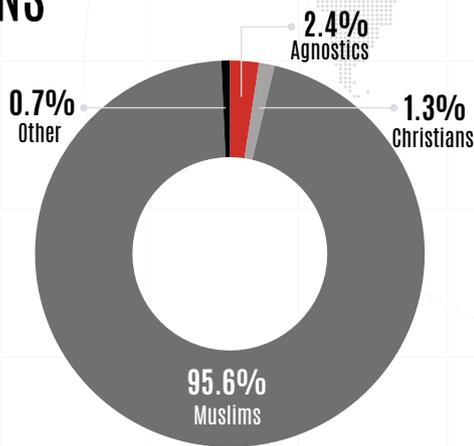




JORDAN

RELIGIONS



LEGAL FRAMEWORK ON FREEDOM OF RELIGION AND ACTUAL APPLICATION

Since it was established, the Kingdom of Jordan has been ruled by the Hashemite dynasty, who originally hail from Makkah and claim to be direct descendants of the Prophet Mohammed. In 1948, Jordan (then called Transjordan) seized East Jerusalem and the West Bank in the first Arab-Israeli War. It lost those territories to Israel in the Six Day War in 1967. As a result of both conflicts, it took in hundreds of thousands of Palestinian refugees, who now constitute the majority of the Jordanian population. Only a minority of Jordanians belong to traditional Bedouin groups who lived for centuries in the area. In 1994, Jordan made a peace treaty with Israel, which 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 has praised the Royal Family for fostering a spirit of tolerance. The Catholic Church is present with parishes and institutions such as Caritas Jordan. The country has also welcomed Christian and Hindu migrant workers, mainly from Asia, temporarily living and working in the country.

According to Article 2 of the Jordanian constitution¹ of 1952, "Islam is the religion of the State". Article 6 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." Under Article 28e, "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 (Islamic 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 other relevant laws do not explicitly ban Muslims from converting to another faith, and there are no penalties under civil law for doing so. Nonetheless,

by giving primacy to Shari'a, which prohibits Muslims from converting to another religion, the government effectively prohibits both conversion from Islam and proselytising Muslims by members of other religions. 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 their right to inherit from their spouse and Muslim relatives.²

Jordan explicitly criminalises blasphemy. Article 273 of Jordan's Penal Code of 1960 states that any individual who insults any of the prophets is liable for a term of imprisonment of one to three years.³

Christians have a quota of nine seats in Parliament and have access to higher ranks in the government and the Armed Forces. The proportion of Christians in the country has been declining for half a century, with the figure now around 1.3 percent of the population, down from 20 percent in 1930.⁴

The 2014 Law for Councils of Christian Denominations officially recognises 11 Christian denominations.⁵ They are the Greek Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Greek Catholic (Melkite), Armenian Orthodox, Maronite Catholic, Assyrian, Coptic, Anglican, Lutheran, Seventh-day Adventist and United Pentecostal Churches. Some Churches were recognised in 2018 as "associations", namely the Free Evangelical Church, the Church of the Nazarene, the Assemblies of God, the Christian and Missionary Alliance, and the Baptist Church. Jehovah's Witnesses are one of the still unrecognised denominations, but such groups have been able to practise their faith, run schools, and operate health facilities without hindrance.⁶ Chaldean and Syriac Christians among Iraqi refugees are referred to as "guests" by the government.

INCIDENTS AND DEVELOPMENTS

In August 2018, the Jordanian army assigned Christian military officers to Christian sites in Palestine and Jerusalem in a symbolic move that reflects the Kingdom's aim to promote pluralism and equality among its citizens.⁷

In December 2018 Jordanian authorities arrested prominent journalist and publisher Mohammed Al Wakeel, who operates the Al Wakeel news website, on charges of blasphemy and irreverence for publishing an image of Jesus.

The arrest followed protests led by the schools of the Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem in Jordan.⁸⁹

In March 2019 King Abdullah received the Lamp of Peace Award of the Franciscan Order in Assisi. In his acceptance speech, the sovereign stressed: "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."¹⁰

At a meeting with Middle Eastern Church leaders in Amman in April 2019, King Abdullah once more affirmed that Christians are an "integral part of the tissue of the Arab world". He also emphasised the role the Hashemite monarchy plays in the protection of Christian and Muslim holy places in Jerusalem.¹¹

In May 2019 King Abdullah II made a personal donation for the restoration of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem.¹²

In June 2019 thousands of radical Muslims took to the streets to protest against the peace plan of the Trump administration to solve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The event was organised by the Islamic Front, the local branch of the Muslim Brotherhood in Jordan.¹³

According to a poll by Arab Barometer only 22 percent of Jordanian youth identify as religious. This represents a decline of seven percent compared to the previous survey.¹⁴

In August 2019 the Jordanian Foreign Office slammed Israel for allowing Jews to visit the Temple Mount/Haram esh-Sharif on the first day of Eid al Adha, describing the decision as one of the many "blunt Israeli violations on the Temple Mount as Palestinians mark the first day of Eid al-Adha", Haaretz reported. The paper quoted a Jordanian spokesperson saying that "Jordan harshly rejects Israel's conduct, which only inflames rage and frustration, and it is a provocation of [Muslim] worshippers on the first day of the Feast of the Sacrifice". Jordan considers itself to be the protector of the Muslim holy sites of Jerusalem.¹⁵

The Tomb of the Prophet Aaron near Petra was shut down in August 2019 after a video went viral that appeared to show Jewish visitors from Israel praying at the site, which is holy to both Muslims and Jews. Jordanian Waqf Minister Abdul Nasser Musa Abu al-Basa, who is in charge of Holy Sites, stated that "the performance of rituals without the knowledge of the Ministry" was the reason for the shut-

down. Jewish visitors of the site denied praying illegally. Soon after the shutdown, the Ministry reopened the site for visitors, except Israelis.¹⁶ Following talks between Israeli President Reuven Rivlin and Jordanian Prince Ghazi, the King's adviser on religious and cultural matters, the two sides reached an agreement allowing Israeli visitors to visit the site after prior coordination and with on-site guides and security.¹⁷

King Abdullah II donated a minibus to an orphanage in Anjara (Northern Jordan) run by the Catholic Order of the Incarnate Word.¹⁸

In September 2019 Jordanian physics professor Hisham Ghassib called Judaism a “despicable” religion in a lecture hosted by the Jordanian Philosophical Society broadcast on Feeneeq Internet TV.¹⁹

In October 2019, during a visit to the Haram esh-Sharif in Jerusalem, Cardinal Leonardo Sandri, Prefect of the Congregation for the Oriental Churches, thanked the Royal Family of Jordan for setting up a meeting with the representatives of the Grand Mufti and the Waqf in Jerusalem.²⁰

On 5th October 2019, Jordanian Deputy Prime Minister Marwan Moasher participated in the celebration of 150 years of Catholic schools in Jordan at the Our Lady of Peace Centre near Amman.²¹

In July 2020 Jordan's Court of Cassation ordered the dissolution of the Jordanian branch of the Muslim Brotherhood due to its failure to resolve its legal status in the Kingdom.²² In September 2020, the Islamic Action Front, the political wing of the Muslim Brotherhood, reversed its decision to boycott the parliamentary elections of November 2020.²³

On 7th October 2020, King Abdullah bestowed honours on Islamic scholars for promoting interreligious peace and understanding during the 18th General Conference of the Royal Aal al-Bayt Institute for Islamic Thought.²⁴

In a commentary on Pope Francis' Encyclical letter 'Fratelli Tutti' published in the Al Arab newspaper, Jordanian Prince Hassan bin Talal emphasised that the document also applies to the Middle East. In the new document, the Pope calls on everyone to recognise that “God created all human beings and made them equal in terms of rights, duties and human dignity,” said the Prince, adding that “The bond of brotherhood that unites all people is the real antidote to all forms of aggression and [to] any desire to oppress those belonging to other social or religious groups.”²⁵

The Heads of the Council of Churches in Jordan issued a statement in October 2020 in reaction to the murder by an Islamist of French teacher Samuel Paty, who had shown caricatures of the Prophet Mohammed to his students in order to explain the concept of freedom of expression. French President Macron later defended the teacher's action. The Council's statement reads: “We, heads of Churches in Jordan (...) closely follow the regrettable events that took place in France due to the tarnishing of Islamic religious symbols and the successive reactions which led to murdering the French teacher, and the subsequent reactions. We consequently condemn all attempts to disparage religions, as well as all acts of violence in our capacity as brethren who worship.”²⁶ Jordan's Foreign Ministry said it condemned the “continued publication of caricatures of Prophet Muhammad under the pretext of freedom of expression” and any “discriminatory and misleading attempts that seek to link Islam with terrorism.” Jordan's opposition Islamic Action Front party called on the French president to apologise for his comments and urged Jordanians to boycott French goods.²⁷ Jordanian shops launched an online campaign aimed at boycotting French products in response to Muhammad caricatures the French President Macron defended. Some media reported “that large stores have taken French milk, cheese and other products off their shelves”.²⁸

Ahead of the November 2020 legislative elections, Roman Catholic Bishop and Latin Patriarchate Vicar for Jordan, William Shomali, issued a statement saying that “worshipping the one God and fulfilling our religious duties go hand-in-hand with the performance of our national duty. One of the basics of good citizenship is casting our votes at the ballot box”. He ended his statement by calling on God to “protect the Hashemite family under the leadership of His Majesty King Abdullah II Ben Al Hussein, protect the Jordanian government, and protect the security agencies that watch over our security and comfort.”²⁹ Nine out of 130 seats in the Jordanian Chamber of Deputies are reserved for Christians.

In November 2020, the Jordanian Ministry of Foreign Affairs denounced Israeli violations of the sanctity of the Al-Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem, the latest of which was allowing Israeli settlers more time to be on the premises of the holy site, the Palestinian Wafa news agency reported. Foreign Ministry spokesman Daifallah al-Fayez said in a statement, quoted by the new agency, that allowing entry of Israeli Jewish visitors to the holy compound was

a “blatant disregard of the historical and legal status quo, which gives Jordan the sole right to run the affairs of the compound and organize Muslim prayers there.”³⁰

PROSPECTS FOR FREEDOM OF RELIGION

Jordan, although not a secular state granting full religious freedom of conscience to all its citizens, continues to be a country where the members of registered Churches enjoy full freedom of worship. Christians also have access to the higher echelons of government. However, the kingdom is a conservative Muslim country. There are clear societal and legal limits for atheists, agnostics and converts from Islam, as well as obstacles to evangelisation. On the fringes, there are problems with radical Islam.

The Hashemite monarchy remains a pillar of interreligious dialogue and actively promotes peaceful coexistence in Jordan and beyond. Above all, King Abdullah himself constantly emphasises the role of Arab Christians in Middle Eastern societies. As a sign of tolerance and hospitality, the Kingdom has opened its borders to Christian refugees from Iraq and Syria. Overall, little has changed during the period under review, and the prospects for religious freedom remain positive.

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