

Refugee Review Tribunal

AUSTRALIA

RRT RESEARCH RESPONSE

Research Response Number: JOR30541
Country: Jordan
Date: 22 September 2006

Keywords: Jordan – Christians – Muslim Brotherhood – Religious freedom – State protection

This response was prepared by the Country Research Section of the Refugee Review Tribunal (RRT) after researching publicly accessible information currently available to the RRT within time constraints. This response is not, and does not purport to be, conclusive as to the merit of any particular claim to refugee status or asylum.

Questions

1. What is the attitude of the Muslim Brotherhood towards Christians in Jordan?
2. What is the attitude of the Muslim Brotherhood towards proselytising Christians in Jordan?
3. Is there evidence to suggest that members of the Muslim Brotherhood or any other Muslim group persecute practising Christians in Jordan?
4. Are the authorities likely to respond to and protect Christians against harm directed towards them by member of the Muslim Brotherhood or any other group?

RESPONSE

1. What is the attitude of the Muslim Brotherhood towards Christians in Jordan?
2. What is the attitude of the Muslim Brotherhood towards proselytising Christians in Jordan?
3. Is there evidence to suggest that members of the Muslim Brotherhood or any other Muslim group persecute practising Christians in Jordan?
4. Are the authorities likely to respond to and protect Christians against harm directed towards them by member of the Muslim Brotherhood or any other group?

The Muslim Brotherhood (*Jama'at al-Ikhwan al-Muslimin*, popularly abbreviated as “*al-Ikhwan*”) is one of the oldest Islamic organisations in the world, with offices throughout the Middle East including Jordan, which advocates the pre-eminence *Sharia* law. In Jordan, the Muslim Brotherhood is the main source of political opposition to the government and the monarchy through their political wing the Islamic Action Front (IAF). Although the IAF contains some smaller Islamic groups, the Muslim Brotherhood is by far the most dominant member of the IAF. The IAF and the Muslim Brotherhood are legal organisations and are considered to be ‘moderate’ within the discourse of political Islam in the Middle East. The IAF currently holds 17 seats in the Jordanian parliament making it the largest opposition bloc and leads the opposition in the 110 member lower house in the parliament. The IAF are

outspoken critics of the Jordanian policies regarding Israel and US foreign policy. Nevertheless, the IAF and the Muslim Brotherhood specifically, have clearly disavowed violence and within the Jordanian context have been a constant presence in the parliamentary sphere. For further information on the Muslim Brotherhood and the IAF in Jordan see:

- Banks, A.S, *et al*, (eds), 2006 'Jordan' in *Political Handbook of the World: 2005-2006*, QC Press, Washington, pp.600-608 – Attachment 1;
- Cambanis, T., 2006, 'Jordan's Islamists see a path to political power. Hamas's victory buoys movement', *Boston Globe*, 21 March - http://www.boston.com/news/world/articles/2006/03/21/jordans_islamists_see_a_path_to_political_power/ - Accessed 4/9/06 - Attachment 2.

The IAF has recently come under pressure from the Jordanian government and international commentators following a visit by four IAF-Muslim Brotherhood parliamentarians to the family of Abu Mas'ab al-Zarqawi, the notorious terrorist who lead a violent *jihadi* resistance in Iraq. Similarly, the IAF have spoken out against the recent comments of Pope Benedict XVI allegedly insulting the Prophet Mohammed. For further information see:

- 'Jordan arrests Brotherhood clerics', 2006, *Aljazeera*, 10 September - <http://english.aljazeera.net/NR/exeres/8F004714-CC5A-484C-A00B-9371D74CFF2F.htm> - Accessed 11/9/06 - Attachment 3;
- Sowell, K., 2006 'Jordan-Muslim Brotherhood Conflict Heats Up After Zarqawi Homage', *ThreatsWatch.org*, 5 July - <http://inbrief.threatswatch.org/2006/07/jordanmuslim-brotherhood-confl/> - Accessed 11/09/06 – Attachment 4;
- 'Muslims deplore Pope speech', 2006, *stuff.co.nz* (originally sourced from *Reuters*), 16 September - <http://www.stuff.co.nz/stuff/0,2106,3798737a12,00.html> – Accessed 20/09/06 – Attachment 5.

Nevertheless, the Muslim Brotherhood/IAF continues to play a crucial role in parliamentary politics in Jordan, relatively free of official interference. This point is significant within an environment of increased government attention to Islamist groups in Jordan following the November 2005 suicide bombing attacks on a number of Amman hotels. Jordan's conspicuous support of US foreign policy and its amicable relations with Israel have made it a target for Islamic *jihadi* groups. Jordan's King Abd'allah is a vocal advocate in the 'War on Terror' and as such many commentators have noted the use and mis-use of 'anti-terror' legislation in Jordan in the pursuit of Islamic terrorist groups in Jordan. See for example:

- Amnesty International, 2006, *AI Report 2006: Jordan* - <http://web.amnesty.org/report2006/jor-summary-eng> - Accessed 25/09/06 - Attachment 6;
- Human Rights Watch, *World Report 2006: Jordan*, 18 January - http://hrw.org/english/docs/2006/01/18/jordan12225_txt.htm - Accessed 25/09/06 - Attachment 7. (Human Rights Watch has also produced a lengthy report on Jordan's security forces, *Suspicious Sweeps. The General Intelligence Department and*

Jordan's Rule of Law Problem. It can be viewed at -
<http://hrw.org/reports/2006/jordan0906/jordan0906web.pdf>.)

No evidence could be found in the sources consulted to indicate that the Muslim Brotherhood or any other Islamic group targets Christians in Jordan. Jordan does not prevent Christians from practicing their faith with major denominations registered as churches. Nevertheless, other Christian groups, including evangelical Christian groups, can still worship if not registered as 'churches' by registering themselves as 'societies'. However, there have been some examples of Christian faiths not being officially recognised and low-level incidences of societal and official discrimination. According to the latest US Department of State's religious freedom report, Jordan:

Officially recognized Christian denominations include the Greek Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Greek Catholic (Melkite), Armenian Orthodox, Maronite Catholic, Assyrian, Coptic, Anglican, Lutheran, Seventh-day Adventist, United Pentecostal, and Presbyterian churches. Other Christian groups, including the Baptists, the Free Evangelicals, the Church of the Nazarene, the Assembly of God, and the Christian and Missionary Alliance, are registered with the Ministry of Interior as "societies" but not as churches. There are a number of Chaldean and Syriac Christians and Shi'a among the estimated 500 thousand to 600 thousand Iraqis in the country, many of whom are undocumented or on visitor permits.

Foreign missionaries operating in the country include representatives of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), Jehovah's Witnesses, Campus Crusade for Christ, Samaritan's Purse, The Evangelical Alliance Mission, Life Agape, Intervarsity, Navigators, Christar, Arab World Ministries, Operation Mobilization, Southern Baptist International Mission Board, the Conservative Baptists, Frontiers, Brother Andrew, the Jesuits, Christian Brothers, Rosary Sisters, Benedictines, Anglican Church Mission Society, the Society of Friends (Quakers), Comboni Sisters, Little Sisters of Jesus, the Religious of Nazareth, Sisters of St. Dorothy, the Daughters of Mary the Helper (Salesian Sisters), the Little Sisters of Nazareth, the Little Family of the Annunciation, Sisters of St. Joseph of the Apparition, Basiliennes Chouerites, Focolare Sisters, Franciscans (OFM), Sons of Divine Providence (Don Orione Fathers), Association Fraternal International, Institute of the Incarnate Word, Franciscans of the Cross, Dominican Sisters of St. Catherine, Franciscan Missionaries of Mary, Franciscan Missionaries of the Immaculate Heart of Mary, Daughters of Mary of the Enclosed Garden, Theresian Institute, and the Missionaries of Charity. (US Department of State, 2006, *International Religious Freedom Report: Jordan*, 15 September - <http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/irf/2006/71424.htm> - Accessed 19/09/06 - Attachment 8)

The report continues:

There were no reports that the practice of any faith was prohibited; however, the Government does not officially recognize all religious groups. Some religious groups, while allowed to meet and practice their faith, faced societal and official discrimination. In addition, not all Christian denominations have applied for or been accorded legal recognition.

The Government does not recognize Jehovah's Witnesses, the Church of Christ, or the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, but each is allowed to conduct religious services without interference.

The Government does not interfere with public worship by the country's Christian minority.

The generally amicable relationship among religious groups in society contributed to religious freedom. Baha'is faced some societal discrimination.

The majority of the population views religion as central to one's personal identity. Muslims who convert to other religions often face social ostracism, threats, and abuse from their families and Muslim religious leaders. Parents usually strongly discourage young adults from pursuing interfaith romantic relationships, because they may lead to conversion. Such relationships may lead to ostracism and, in some cases, violence against the couple or feuds between members of the couple's families. When such situations arise, families may approach local government officials for resolution. In the past, there were reports that in some cases local government officials encouraged Christian women involved in relationships with Muslim men to convert to Islam to defuse potential family or tribal conflict and keep the peace; however, during the period covered by this report, there were no known cases in which local officials encouraged conversion from Christianity to Islam. (US Department of State, 2006, *International Religious Freedom Report: Jordan*, 15 September - <http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/irf/2006/71424.htm> - Accessed 19/09/06 - Attachment 8)

Issues such as marriage, divorce, inheritance and conversion are dealt with on a confessional basis under the broad rubric of 'personal status laws'. Whilst there is no specific law against proselytising or conversion both the *Sharia* law courts as well as official and societal attitudes strongly discourage public proselytising by non-Muslim groups and the conversion of Muslims to Christianity. Under *Sharia* Jordan does not recognise the conversion of a Muslim to any other religion. There is no recent evidence to indicate the successful prosecution of any Muslim who has converted to Christianity. However, there is significant evidence to suggest that a convert from Islam would be vulnerable to discrimination and even violent retribution from within the community and specifically their own families. Essentially, the evidence suggests that those born to the Christian faith are relatively free to worship in Jordan whilst those Muslims who convert to another religion are appreciably more vulnerable to official and societal discrimination and even violence. The US State Department notes again that:

Because Shari'a law governs the personal status of Muslims, converting from Islam to Christianity and proselytism of Muslims are not allowed. Muslims who convert to another religion face societal and governmental discrimination. The Government does not recognize the legality of such conversions. Under Shari'a, converts are regarded as apostates and may be denied their civil and property rights. In the past, this principle has not been applied, but during the last reporting period a convert to Christianity was found guilty of apostasy and stripped of many of his civil rights. The Government maintains it neither encourages nor prohibits apostasy. The Government does not recognize converts from Islam as falling under the jurisdiction of their new religious community's laws in matters of personal status; converts are still considered Muslims. Converts to Islam fall under the jurisdiction of Shari'a courts. Shari'a, in theory, provides for the death penalty for Muslims who apostatize; however, such punishment has never been applied in the country.

There is no statute that expressly forbids proselytism of Muslims; however Government policy requires that foreign missionary groups refrain from public proselytism. In August 2005 two foreign missionaries were expelled from the country after a member of parliament complained to the minister of the interior that they were proselytizing among children without the permission of the parents. In the past, the Government has taken action against some non-Orthodox Christian missionaries in response to Orthodox Christians who complained that missionary activities disrupt the peace and cohesion of society.

Despite past difficulty in obtaining legal status, the Jordan Evangelical Theological Seminary (JETS), a Christian training school for pastors and missionaries, was registered with the Government and operates as a cultural center. JETS is permitted to appoint faculty and administration, but as a consequence the Government denies accreditation as an academic institution. Students and faculty from abroad wishing to attend JETS were sometimes able to live temporarily in the country by using tourist visas; however, because of the lack of accreditation, visas were sometimes not granted. Many students overstayed their visas and upon departure from the country were required to pay two dollars for each day they spent without a visa. JETS is forbidden by the Government to accept Muslim students. During the reporting period, JETS denied the request of a Muslim former member of parliament to attend classes due to the Government's policy against Muslims studying at the center. In the past, seven foreign students who had converted from Islam to Christianity were forced out of the program and required to leave the country. The Government authorized JETS to own property, and in August 2003 the organization broke ground on a new facility. During the reporting year, the Government confiscated a shipment of approximately one hundred books ordered by JETS. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs intervened and secured the release of the books to JETS. (US Department of State, 2006, *International Religious Freedom Report: Jordan*, 15 September - <http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/irf/2006/71424.htm> - Accessed 19/09/06 - Attachment 8)

The generally favourable treatment of Christians in Jordan is confirmed in January 2006 by Selim Sayegh, the Auxillary Bishop and Latin Vicar General for Jordan, who concludes his report by stating, "the situation in this regard in Jordan is one of the best in the Arab countries. It remains, despite the last terrorist events, few months ago (sic), a secure country. It remains a secure country for normal and complementary Christian-Moslem relations". The Bishop does, however, note that there is concern about the rising Islamist sentiment in Jordan but states that 'the government is trying to stop its extremism or tendency of imposing social Islam on society'. (Sayegh, S., 2006, *Relations Between Moslems and Christians in Jordan*, 17 January - <http://storage.paxchristi.net/ME16E06.pdf> - Accessed 19/09/06 - Attachment 9)

List of Sources Consulted

Internet Sources:

Government Information & Reports

US Department of State, 2006, *International Religious Freedom Report: Jordan*, 15 September - <http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/irf/2006/71424.htm>

Non-Government Organisations

Amnesty International, 2006, *AI Report 2006: Jordan* -

<http://web.amnesty.org/report2006/jor-summary-eng>

Human Rights Watch, *World Report 2006: Jordan*, 18 January -

http://hrw.org/english/docs/2006/01/18/jordan12225_txt.htm

Pax Christi International – www.paxchristi.net

International News & Politics

Boston Globe – www.boston.com

Aljazeera – www.english.aljazeera.net

Stuff.nz (New Zealand news site) – www.stuff.co.nz

Region Specific Links

Topic Specific Links

ThreatsWatch – www.inbrief.threatswatch.org

Search Engines

Google search engine <http://www.google.com.au/>

Databases:

ISYS (RRT Country Research database, including Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, US Department of State Reports)

RRT Library Catalogue

List of Attachments

1. Banks, A.S, *et al*, (eds), 2006 'Jordan' in *Political Handbook of the World: 2005-2006*, QC Press, Washington. (MRT-RRT Library)
2. Cambanis, T., 2006, 'Jordan's Islamists see a path to political power. Hamas's victory buoys movement', *Boston Globe*, 21 March - http://www.boston.com/news/world/articles/2006/03/21/jordans_islamists_see_a_path_to_political_power/ - Accessed 4/9/06.
3. 'Jordan arrests Brotherhood clerics', 2006, *Aljazeera*, 10 September - <http://english.aljazeera.net/NR/exeres/8F004714-CC5A-484C-A00B-9371D74CFF2F.htm> - Accessed 11/9/06.
4. Sowell, K., 2006 'Jordan-Muslim Brotherhood Conflict Heats Up After Zarqawi Homage', ThreatsWatch.org, 5 July - <http://inbrief.threatswatch.org/2006/07/jordanmuslim-brotherhood-confli/> - Accessed 11/09/06.
5. 'Muslims deplore Pope speech', 2006, stuff.co.nz (originally sourced from *Reuters*), 16 September - <http://www.stuff.co.nz/stuff/0,2106,3798737a12,00.html> - Accessed 20/09/06.
6. Amnesty International, 2006, *AI Report 2006: Jordan* - <http://web.amnesty.org/report2006/jor-summary-eng> - Accessed 25/09/06.
7. Human Rights Watch, *World Report 2006: Jordan*, 18 January - http://hrw.org/english/docs/2006/01/18/jordan12225_txt.htm - Accessed 25/09/06.
8. US Department of State, 2006, *International Religious Freedom Report: Jordan*, 15 September - <http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/irf/2006/71424.htm> - Accessed 19/09/06.
9. Sayegh, S., 2006, *Relations Between Moslems and Christians in Jordan*, 17 January - <http://storage.paxchristi.net/ME16E06.pdf> - Accessed 19/09/06.