



CORI Research Analysis

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Country: Niger

Issues: Treatment of Christians in Niger, including Muslims converted to Christianity

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What is the treatment of Christians in Niger, including Muslims converted to Christianity?

Islam is practised by more than 90% of the population in Niger.¹ Approximately 95% of Muslims in Niger are Sunni and 5% are Shia². According to the US State Department Christians account for less than 5% of the population and are mainly present in Maradi, Dogondoutchi, Niamey and other urban centres with expatriate populations.³

The US State Department reported that the Constitution of Niger provided for freedom of religion and that other laws and policies contributed to the generally free practice of religion⁴. The USSD states that the law at all levels protects this right against abuse, either by governmental or private actor and that the Government generally respects this right in practice.⁵

¹ US State Department, 14 September 2007. [International Religious Freedom Report 2007: Niger](#)

² US State Department, 19 September 2008. [International Religious Freedom Report 2008: Niger](#)

³ US State Department, 19 September 2008. [International Religious Freedom Report 2008: Niger](#)

⁴ US State Department, 19 September 2008. [International Religious Freedom Report 2008: Niger](#)

⁵ US State Department, 19 September 2008. [International Religious Freedom Report 2008: Niger](#)

Religious organizations must register with the Interior Ministry, although the USSD describes this as a formality.⁶ The USSD reported that it received no evidence that the Nigerien government favoured any particular religious group or that it refused to register any religious group. The process of registration requires an organization to submit relevant legal documents and for its leaders to be interviewed.⁷

In 2007 the Ministry of Religious Affairs was created, it promotes inter faith dialogue and elicits religious view points on government policies and programmes.⁸

According to the USSD the Government observes both Islamic and Christian holy dates as national holidays including Christmas, Easter Monday, Eid el-Adha, Muharram, Maulid al-Nabi, Lailat al-Qadr, and Eid al-Fitr.⁹ The USSD reports that it is not uncommon for Muslims and Christians to attend each others festivities during these holidays.¹⁰ Senior level government officials who are required to take oaths may do so on the holy book of their choosing.¹¹

In 2007 the USSD reported that the Nigerien Government did not permit religious instruction in schools.¹² According to the USSD the Government does not impose restrictions on religious speech as long as there is no intent to disrespect public order, social peace, and national unity.¹³ The government monitors religious expression that it views as potentially threatening to public order or national unity.¹⁴ The USSD reports that prominent societal leaders took positive steps to promote religious freedom.¹⁵

According to the USSD there were no reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice within the reporting period of their 2008 report on religious freedom in Niger.¹⁶ However sources indicate that instances of religious violence have occurred infrequently over the last 10 years.¹⁷

Freedom House reported that although freedom of religion was mostly respected, Muslims in Niger were not uniformly tolerant of minority religions.¹⁸ CISA, a Catholic news service states that some Muslims view Christianity as a foreign religion.¹⁹ The USSD reports that Christianity was brought to Niger through French colonial institutions, the Christian population includes believers from educated, elite and colonial families as well as immigrants from neighbouring countries such as Benin, Ghana and Togo.²⁰

A 2006 study undertaken into Islamic practices in Niger reported that in the capital, Niamey, the attitude of some reformist churches in working-class areas such as Boukoko which try to recruit

⁶ US State Department. 19 September 2008. [International Religious Freedom Report 2008: Niger](#)

⁷ US State Department. 19 September 2008. [International Religious Freedom Report 2008: Niger](#)

⁸ US State Department. 19 September 2008. [International Religious Freedom Report 2008: Niger](#)

⁹ US State Department. 19 September 2008. [International Religious Freedom Report 2008: Niger](#)

¹⁰ US State Department. 19 September 2008. [International Religious Freedom Report 2008: Niger](#)

¹¹ US State Department. 14 September 2007. [International Religious Freedom Report 2007: Niger](#)

¹² US State Department. 14 September 2007. [International Religious Freedom Report 2007: Niger](#)

¹³ US State Department. 14 September 2007. [International Religious Freedom Report 2007: Niger](#)

¹⁴ US State Department. 14 September 2007. [International Religious Freedom Report 2007: Niger](#)

¹⁵ US State Department. 19 September 2008. [International Religious Freedom Report 2008: Niger](#)

¹⁶ US State Department. 19 September 2008. [International Religious Freedom Report 2008: Niger](#)

¹⁷ Barbara M. Cooper (2006) *Evangelical Christians in the Muslim Sahel* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press); M. Hassane, M. Doka, M. Bawa. April 2006. [Etude sur les pratiques de l'Islam au Niger. Rapport Provisoire](#) (Danida Bureau de Cooperation Danoise-Niger); US State Department. 8 November 2005. [International Religious Freedom Report: Niger, 2005](#)

¹⁸ Freedom House. 2008. [Freedom in the World Country Reports: Niger](#)

¹⁹ Catholic News Service. 16 January 2006. [Niger: small church turns 75 in Muslim nation](#)

²⁰ US State Department. 14 September 2007. [International Religious Freedom Report 2007: Niger](#)

followers among children sometimes provoked conflicts between Muslims and Christians. It also reported that in Maradi, hostility towards the Christian community arose among followers of Wahhabism. According to the study tension broke out following a pastor's preachings that allegedly defamed the prophet Mohamed.²¹ Members of the Wahhabist Izalay sect reacted by attacking Christians and their property²². This 2006 study does not give a date for the occurrence of these events. The USSD also reports an incident in Maradi in 2005, stating that 100 protestors threw stones and burnt tyres outside an American missionary church compound. The report states that eyewitnesses reported that the protestors chanted "Allah Akbar". The USSD report emphasizes that there were 'turbulences' throughout that day in Maradi, due to protests over a new tax.²³

A study by Professor Barbara Cooper of evangelical Christians in Niger found that commercial, cultural and family links between the urban area of Maradi and Northern Nigeria have meant that religious dynamics in Nigeria can overflow into Maradi.²⁴ For example, the report states that as tensions have arisen between Christians and Muslims in Nigeria, tensions have grown between faiths in Niger.²⁵ The study states that Muslim resentment towards the intrusion of Christian missionaries is quite intense and has played an important role in shaping the practice of Christianity in the area.²⁶ Evangelical Hausa Christians have adapted religious practices in ways that avoid antagonising Muslim sensibilities, such as not dancing in church.²⁷ In contrast, the newer Pentecostal church actively rejects Islam and works to eliminate Islamic practices, which tends to inflame Muslim resentments.²⁸

The study also finds that Christians in Niger may be viewed locally as "western" and "modern".²⁹ Niger is reliant on western aid,³⁰ the study reports that religious violence in Niger can also be a form of protest against the undemocratic involvement of Western economic actors in Niger's social, cultural and political life³¹.

Despite the incidents of tension documented by the study the author notes that historically Hausa Muslims and Christians in the urban centre of Maradi have lived alongside each other relatively peacefully.³² However the study also notes that Christians may feel marginalized and

²¹ M. Hassane, M. Doka, M. Bawa. April 2006. [Etude sur les pratiques de l'Islam au Niger. Rapport Provisoire](#) (Danida Bureau de Cooperation Danoise-Niger)

²² M. Hassane, M. Doka, M. Bawa. April 2006. [Etude sur les pratiques de l'Islam au Niger. Rapport Provisoire](#) (Danida Bureau de Cooperation Danoise-Niger)

²³ US State Department. 8 November 2005. [International Religious Freedom Report: Niger, 2005](#)

²⁴ Barbara M. Cooper (2006) *Evangelical Christians in the Muslim Sahel* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press), p.11-12

²⁵ Barbara M. Cooper (2006) *Evangelical Christians in the Muslim Sahel* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press), p.11-12

²⁶ Barbara M. Cooper (2006) *Evangelical Christians in the Muslim Sahel* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press), p.12

²⁷ Barbara M. Cooper (2006) *Evangelical Christians in the Muslim Sahel* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press), p.378

²⁸ Barbara M. Cooper (2006) *Evangelical Christians in the Muslim Sahel* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press), p.378-9

²⁹ Barbara M. Cooper (2006) *Evangelical Christians in the Muslim Sahel* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press), p.38

³⁰ Barbara M. Cooper (2006) *Evangelical Christians in the Muslim Sahel* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press), p.38

³¹ Barbara M. Cooper (2006) *Evangelical Christians in the Muslim Sahel* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press), p.60

³² Barbara M. Cooper (2006) *Evangelical Christians in the Muslim Sahel* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press), p.376

vulnerable and therefore value living near other Christians for security and sociability,³³ placing importance in participating in a specifically Christian community.³⁴ The study notes that many Christians keep to themselves out of fear or indifference.³⁵ The study reports that many Christian churches in Maradi are unmarked and can only be found if one is aware of the name by which it is known locally by congregation members.³⁶ It identified that Christian women are careful to avoid a particular mosque when moving through the town in order to avoid hostile groups of students but also noted that Muslim women need to be similarly careful moving through the town.³⁷

The study states that Hausa's in Maradi are assumed to be Muslim and that Christian Hausa identity is complex. Missionary churches adopt the cultural and ethnic mantle of the dominant ethnic group, consequently many Hausa speaking Christians are not ethnically Hausa.³⁸

The study states that gifts and exchanges are important in Hausa culture to establish social ties, however due to religious observances and prohibitions Christians and Muslims may decline each others gifts.³⁹ Evangelical Christians may also feel they have something to offer Muslims in terms of spiritual practice whilst refusing to accept anything in return.⁴⁰ The study notes that this has disrupted the social economy and that religious friction is increasing.⁴¹ The study noted that the number of male Christians exceed the number of female Christians in Maradi as Muslim men are far more likely to be exposed to Christianity and to convert than are Muslim women.⁴²

The Research Directorate of the Immigration and Refugee Board, Canada undertook telephone interviews in 2005 with a journalist from the Niger organisation, Réseau des Journalistes pour les droits de l'homme (Journalists Network for Human Rights) to identify how Muslim women who marry Christians abroad without their parents consent and convert to Christianity are treated.⁴³ The source reported that whilst interfaith marriages were common, a woman's conversion to Islam can cause family problems. A Muslim man can marry a Christian woman and it may be acceptable for her convert to Islam. However, the contrary is inconceivable. The community will not accept that she converts to Christianity. The source highlighted the important role of the community in Niger and reported that a woman's conversion to Christianity and marrying without consent can cause her serious difficulties in integrating into the community,

³³ Barbara M. Cooper (2006) *Evangelical Christians in the Muslim Sahel* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press), p.34

³⁴ Barbara M. Cooper (2006) *Evangelical Christians in the Muslim Sahel* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press), p.377

³⁵ Barbara M. Cooper (2006) *Evangelical Christians in the Muslim Sahel* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press), p.377

³⁶ Barbara M. Cooper (2006) *Evangelical Christians in the Muslim Sahel* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press), p.36

³⁷ Barbara M. Cooper (2006) *Evangelical Christians in the Muslim Sahel* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press), p.35

³⁸ Barbara M. Cooper (2006) *Evangelical Christians in the Muslim Sahel* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press), p.28

³⁹ Barbara M. Cooper (2006) *Evangelical Christians in the Muslim Sahel* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press), p.376

⁴⁰ Barbara M. Cooper (2006) *Evangelical Christians in the Muslim Sahel* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press), p.376

⁴¹ Barbara M. Cooper (2006) *Evangelical Christians in the Muslim Sahel* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press), p.379

⁴² Barbara M. Cooper (2006) *Evangelical Christians in the Muslim Sahel* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press), p.53

⁴³ Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada. 25 January 2005. [Responses to Information Requests: Treatment of Muslim women who marry Christians abroad without the consent of their parents and who convert to Christianity. NER43271.FE](#)

especially if she belongs to a conservative family. It reported that the consequences include being locked up, shunned or heavily pressured until she changes her mind.⁴⁴

A Christian missionary working in Niger with the International Mission Board of the Southern Baptist Organisation provided CORI with the following information in response to an interview conducted on 12 March 2009.⁴⁵

He advised that Christians are treated with a general tolerance in Niger with social attitudes ranging from bemusement to contempt. He has not witnessed widespread difficulties or problems with people converting to Christianity for the reason that there are not that many who do convert, the threat of persecution being a factor in this. He advised that the government allows religious freedom so the problems that converts encounter tend to come from family and the immediate community. He has been told numerous times and sometimes seen that when someone becomes a Christian, if they are a dependent, they will likely be refused meals and a place to stay. They may have no one to bury them or a place to be buried. Sometimes they are disowned, occasionally they may be physically harmed. They are quite often mocked and made fun of or humiliated in front of others. He has heard accounts of employers firing an employee who became a Christian and of landlords evicting a tenant who became a Christian. There is also a fear of being perceived as one who brings shame on their family, which Muslims in Niger consider you are doing by becoming a Christian. He has been told by young men that he has met in the course of his work who advise that they would like to follow Christ but that they are unable to because of their family, they would have nowhere to live.⁴⁶

⁴⁴ Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada. 25 January 2005. [Responses to Information Requests: Treatment of Muslim women who marry Christians abroad without the consent of their parents and who convert to Christianity. NER43271.FE](#)

⁴⁵ Interview conducted by email

⁴⁶ Email correspondence with CORI from Christian missionary working with the International Mission Board of the Southern Baptist Organisation in Niger, 12 March 2009

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Published sources consulted (Including internet sites)

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International Mission Board of the Southern Baptist Convention
IRIN
Journal Chretien
Le Republicain-Niger,
Libération-Niger
Organisation Internationale de la Francophonie; Délégation à la paix, à la démocratie et aux droits de l'Homme
Radio France Internationale
Religious Liberty Commission, World Evangelical Alliance,
Serving in Mission
UN Charter-based bodies
UN Treaty-based bodies
US State Department
Women living under Muslim Laws

Research interviews

The following organisations were contacted by email for information and provided a response;

- International Mission Board of the Southern Baptist Organisation

The following organisations were contacted by email for information however no response was received within the time frame of the research;

- Réseau des journalistes pour les droits de l'homme du Niger, RJDH (Journalists Network for Human Rights)
- Association Nigérienne de Défense des Droits de l'Homme, ANDDH (Nigerian Association for the Defence of Human Rights)
- Barnabas Fund
- Eglise évangélique de la République du Niger, EERN (Evangelical Church of the Republic of Niger)