

## “Coming Out” or “Staying in the Closet” – Deconversion Narratives of Muslim Apostates in Jordan

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### Abstract

This article describes a pilot study conducted between 22.03.2013 and 22.05.2013 among deconverts from Islam in Jordan. Due to the religious and cultural taboo surrounding apostasy, those who left Islam are notoriously difficult to access in a systematic way and constitute what is known in social research as a ‘hidden’ or ‘hard-to-reach’ population. Consequently, the non-probability sampling methods, namely an online survey, were used to recruit participants to the study. The objective of this research was threefold: (a) exploring the community of apostates from Islam in Jordan, (b) understanding the rationale behind decision to disaffiliate from Islam, and (c) analysing their narratives of deconversion. In addition, this paper examines the changes that occurred in respondents’ lives as a result of their apostasy and the degree of secrecy about their decision.

### Background

The problem of apostasy from Islam is a complex and controversial one. The Quran itself does not explicitly name death as a prescribed penalty for abandoning Islam. The commonly agreed interpretation of the few verses (Arabic – *ayats*) that mention apostasy is to the effect that Allah will inflict punishment on apostates in the afterlife (Quran, 2:17, 3:87, 9:74, 18:29<sup>1</sup>; usually invoked in this context is *ayat* from surah Al-Baqara (2:256) “There is no compulsion in religion”<sup>2</sup>). In the Sunna, on the other hand, we can find a number of hadiths (e.g. Al Bukhari<sup>3</sup>, in which the Prophet or his companions ordered to kill individuals that left Islam - although, many others, according to which even the Prophet forgave apostates, can be found, e.g. *Sunan an-Nasa'i*, Book 37:104 or *Sunan Abi Dawud*, Book 40:8). Based on them, all major schools of Islamic law prescribe capital punishment as a penalty for apostasy, while at the same time disagreeing on some basic issues such as whether women should also be killed

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<sup>1</sup> *The Koran Interpreted: a Translation*, ed. A. J. Arberry (Touchstone, 1996).

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> Al-Bukhari, *Sahih* (Dar tuq an-naga'a, 2001).

or rather imprisoned and beaten until they come back to Islam<sup>4</sup>. At the same time, though, as noted by Cook<sup>5</sup>, “it is not certain when this [death penalty for apostasy] became normative (probably during the early Abbasid times),” since “it appears that there were very few executions of apostates during the Umayyad period and during the reign of early Abbasids” and the actual practice during the life of the Prophet and the first caliphs is rather difficult to establish.

Nevertheless, the vast majority of Muslim thinkers in the pre-modern period was of opinion that capital punishment is a mandatory one for apostates<sup>6</sup>. These days, however, a relatively small, yet growing number of scholars, such as Mohammad Hashim Kamali<sup>7</sup> or Mohsen Kadivar<sup>8</sup>, question or outright oppose such a view.

As for the country legislature, nowadays most of the Muslim countries do not treat apostasy as a criminal offence, and so converts from Islam do not officially face death penalty. Constitutions of the majority of predominantly Muslim countries in which Islam is the state religion, with the exception of Comoros, Mauritania, Algeria, Saudi Arabia, Yemen, and the Maldives, provide constitutional guarantees of freedom of religion or belief<sup>9</sup>.

At the same time, though, apostasy is considered a criminal offence in Afghanistan, Brunei<sup>10</sup>, Kuwait, Comoros, Mauritania (based on the 1983 Criminal Code, an apostate is given 3 days

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<sup>4</sup> Most Shi'a and Hanafi scholars believe women should be imprisoned and beaten until they come back to Islam. The majority view of Maliki, Shafi'i and Hanbali scholars is that an apostate, regardless of their gender, should be killed.

<sup>5</sup> David Cook, "Apostasy from Islam: A Historical Perspective," *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 31 (2006): 248-288.

<sup>6</sup> Abdullah Saeed and Hassan Saeed, *Freedom of Religion, Apostasy and Islam* (Ashgate Pub Ltd, 2004).

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Mohsen Kadivar, "Freedom of Religion and Belief in Islam," in *Islam and Religious Diversity. Critical Concepts in Islamic Studies*, ed. Lloyd Ridgeon (London and New York: Routledge, 2014), 198-220.

<sup>9</sup> United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, *The Religion-State Relationship and the Right to Freedom of Religion or Belief : A Comparative Textual Analysis of the Constitutions of Majority Muslim Countries and Other Oic Members* (Washington, DC: United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, 2012).

<sup>10</sup> Until recently, Muslims could abandon Islam after receiving a formal permission from the state. A sharia-based 2014 Criminal Code, not fully in force yet, deems apostasy a capital crime, though. The separate provisions are supposed to be imposed gradually in three phases until 2017. Human Rights Council Working Group on the Universal Periodic Review Nineteenth session, "National Report Submitted in Accordance with

to repent), Sudan (Penal Code of 1991), Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates (Penal Code of 1987), Qatar (2004 Penal Law)<sup>11</sup> and Yemen (Penal Code of 1994)<sup>12</sup>. The criminal and penal laws of Morocco do not mention apostasy at all, although the Supreme Council of Religious Scholars issued in April 2013 a fatwa naming it a capital offence. Similarly, in Maldives it is not legally persecuted, but at the same time apostasy is considered a breach of the Islamic law. In Bahrain, the constitution “implies that Muslims are forbidden to change their religion”<sup>13</sup>, and in Malaysia apostasy is considered a capital offence in the Kelantan and Terengganu provinces, yet since the state law does not contain such a provision, the status of those local laws is not fully clear.

In general, those laws are not widely enforced by the states; in Saudi Arabia the last reported case of execution for apostasy was in 1992, in Qatar – in 1971<sup>14</sup>. There have been reported cases of converts from Islam being put before court in Iran; even though the Iranian Penal Code does not specifically name apostasy a crime, it appears to be the only country where the death punishment for abandoning Islam has been actually implemented<sup>15</sup>.

In some countries, like Egypt<sup>16</sup> or Iraq<sup>17</sup>, conversion from Islam is not prohibited by law, but in effect it is formally impossible due to the obstacles placed by officials, who decline to recognize conversions on legal documents. Yet in other countries, like Libya, Turkey, Algeria or Tunisia, there may be no official stumbling blocks, but as everywhere else in the Muslim world (or among religious people in general, regardless of the religion they profess, for that matter), the societal pressure and vision of “civil death” forces many people to “stay in the closet”.

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Paragraph 5 of the Annex to Human Rights Council Resolution 16/21" (2014); Hanibal Goitom, ed., *Laws Criminalizing Apostasy in Selected Jurisdictions* (Global Legal Research Center, 2014).

<sup>11</sup> Goitom, *op.cit.*

<sup>12</sup> U.S. Department of State, "International Religious Freedom Report for 2013. Jordan" (2013).

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> "International Religious Freedom Report for 2013", U.S. Department of State (2014).

<sup>15</sup> Goitom, *op. cit.*

<sup>16</sup> Moataz Ahmed El Fegiery, "Islamic Law and Freedom of Religion: The Case of Apostasy and Its Legal Implications in Egypt", *Muslim World Journal of Human Rights* 10 (2013), 1-26.

<sup>17</sup> The core of this article has been completed before the emergence of DAESH, the so-called “Islamic State”, whose territories cover parts of Iraq and in which abandoning Islam is punishable by death.

It is also worth mentioning that in certain instances, for example in Somalia or Egypt<sup>18</sup>, in the absence of direct criminalization of apostasy, blasphemy laws might be applied to put the converts from Islam before court<sup>19</sup>, both by the authorities and relatives or business partners seeking to win the inheritance cases<sup>20</sup> or commercial legal disputes.

In Jordan, the constitution guarantees “the free exercise of all forms of worship and religious rites in accordance with the customs observed in the Kingdom, unless such is inconsistent with public order or morality”<sup>21</sup>. At the same time, though, Islam is the official religion of the state and as stated by the law “matters of personal status of Moslems”<sup>22</sup> fall under the jurisdiction of Sharia Courts, which “shall in the exercise of their jurisdiction apply the provisions of the Sharia law”<sup>23</sup>. According to the US Bureau of Democracy<sup>24</sup>:

As the government does not allow conversion from Islam, it also does not recognize converts from Islam as falling under the jurisdiction of their new religious community’s laws in matters of personal status. Under Islamic law, these converts are considered to be Muslims and generally regarded as apostates. Any member of society may file an apostasy complaint against them. In cases that an Islamic law court decides, judges can annul converts’ marriages, transfer child custody to a non-parent Muslim family member or declare them ‘wards of the state’, convey an individual’s property rights to Muslim family members, and deprive individuals of many civil rights (converts from Islam face similar situation in Oman and Syria).

Although the law does not officially penalize apostasy with death, the Jordanian Iftaa’ Department, which is responsible for issuing official fatwas, ruled on a number of occasions otherwise, such as in public fatwa No. 901 dated 02.08.2010<sup>25</sup> or No. 237 from 28.05.2009<sup>26</sup>.

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<sup>18</sup> El Fegiery, *op.cit.*

<sup>19</sup> *Dissent Denied. Survey of Global Blasphemy and Incitement Laws & Cases*, a report by the Center for Inquiry (2013).

<sup>20</sup> Maurits Berger, "Apostasy and Public Policy in Contemporary Egypt: An Evaluation of Recent Cases from Egypt's Highest Courts," *Human Rights Quarterly* 25, no. 3 (2003), 720-740.

<sup>21</sup> Constitution of the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, January 01, 1952, art. 14, <http://www.refworld.org/docid/3ae6b53310.html> (accessed on 15 May, 2014).

<sup>22</sup> Constitution of the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, 1 January, 1952, art. 105.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>24</sup> Bureau of Democracy U.S. State Department, Human Rights, and Labor, "International Religious Freedom Report 2001. Jordan" (2001).

<sup>25</sup> “Dā’irat al-’iftā’ al-’ām (General Iftaa’ Department”, accessed 20 November 2014, <http://aliftaa.jo/Question.aspx?QuestionId=901#.VcXvNvnNLID>

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

The exact number of apostasy cases in Jordan is unknown (U.S Department of State quotes “a few converts from Islam to Christianity” in 2010<sup>27</sup> and the data in other sources is equally imprecise). The first publicly known case of official ruling against an apostate from Islam in the modern Jordan took place in 2004, whereupon a convert to Christianity was stripped of all his civil rights on account of his abandoning Islam<sup>28</sup>, and another such instance was reported in 2008<sup>29</sup>. Those quoted by the media include a poet accused of apostasy in 2000<sup>30</sup>, and another one in 2008, because of their allegedly blasphemous collection of poetry<sup>31</sup>, a group of journalists from Al Hilal weekly in 2003<sup>32</sup>, who published an article on the Prophet’s sexuality, and more recently, in 2012, another journalist who published a piece reportedly indicating that he was an apostate<sup>33</sup>. Another case, of a convert to Baha’ism, was brought in court in 2010 by his brother<sup>34</sup>. According to the US Bureau of Democracy, „sometimes charges of apostasy were levelled by family members seeking to prevent someone from inheriting property, or in order to gain advantage in legal disputes”<sup>35</sup>, like in the case of Mahmoud A. M. Eleker in 2006<sup>36</sup>. Accusations of blasphemy and apostasy have also been made against individuals making unfavourable to the government comments in the social media outlets (similar cases has been reported in Mauritania, Saudi Arabia, and Yemen<sup>37</sup>).

Although individual cases of legal accusations of apostasy have been reported almost yearly (in fact at one point the entire Jordanian government was accused of apostasy by the Islamic

<sup>27</sup> Bureau of Democracy U.S. State Department, Human Rights, and Labor, "International Religious Freedom Report 2010. Jordan" (2010).

<sup>28</sup> *International Religious Freedom Report 2007. Jordan*, U.S. Department of State (2007).

<sup>29</sup> *International Religious Freedom Report 2010. Jordan*, U.S. Department of State (2010).

<sup>30</sup> *International Religious Freedom Report 2001. Jordan*, U.S. Department of State (2001).

<sup>31</sup> Suha Maayeh, "Poet Accused of Being Enemy of Islam," *The National* (06.10.2008), <http://www.thenational.ae/news/world/middle-east/poet-accused-of-being-enemy-of-islam>.

<sup>32</sup> Sana Abdallah, "Jordan Islamists Issue Apostasy Fatwa," *upi.com* (22.01.2003), [http://www.upi.com/Business\\_News/Security-Industry/2003/01/22/Jordan-Islamists-issue-apostasy-fatwa/99041043248750/](http://www.upi.com/Business_News/Security-Industry/2003/01/22/Jordan-Islamists-issue-apostasy-fatwa/99041043248750/).

<sup>33</sup> Anonymous, "رداً على جبهة العمل الاسلامي .. الحكومة ترفض وتدين "الاساءات لدور القوات المسلحة", *Ammon News* (15.12.2015), <http://www.ammonnews.net/article.aspx?articleNO=75654>.

<sup>34</sup> *International Religious Freedom Report 2010. Jordan*.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> *International Religious Freedom Report 2007. Jordan*.

<sup>37</sup> Goitom, "Laws Criminalizing Apostasy in Selected Jurisdictions."

Action Front for assisting the U.S. in Afghanistan<sup>38</sup>), it is difficult, if not outright impossible, to assess the number of Jordanians who abandoned Islam, the most important reason for that being the secrecy of conversions and deconversion from Islam due to fear for one's life. One might attempt an educated guess based on the statistics on religiosity in the region provided by World Value Surveys and PEW Research Center, however due to cultural sensitivities and the taboo surrounding atheism in Muslim societies, it is highly questionable whether those numbers can be trusted. According to Wave 6 (2010-2014) of World Value Surveys, full 100 percent of Jordanian believed in God. Since the results of Wave 4 (2000-2004) gave slightly different results, i.e. 0.2 percent of the population claimed they did not believe in God and another 0.2 percent was "not sure", it would seem that the number of Jordanians not believing in God actually decreased<sup>39</sup>.

Naturally, being an atheist does not equal being an ex-Muslim and vice versa. Muslims may convert to other faiths, and atheists might still consider themselves Muslims (even if only cultural ones<sup>40</sup>), or may have previously been members of other religious groups residing in Jordan. More helpful might be then a survey conducted by the PEW Research Center in 2012, which asked a more precise question – "Do you believe in one God, Allah, and his prophet Muhammad?" (which effectively means: "Are you a Muslim<sup>41</sup>"). Less than 1 percent of surveyed Jordanians responded negatively to it<sup>42</sup>. However, it is estimated that between 2

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<sup>38</sup> Anonymous, "Islamic action front accuses the Jordanian government of apostasy", 12 December, 2010, <http://black-iris.com/2010/12/15/islamic-action-front-accuses-the-jordanian-government-of-apostasy>. Accessed 20 April, 2014.

<sup>39</sup> World Value Survey, <http://www.wvsevsdb.com/wvs/WVSanalyzeQuestion.jsp>. (accessed 7 May, 2014).

<sup>40</sup> A small, but increasing number of people with a Muslim background chooses to identify themselves as a "cultural Muslim". For a discussion on what this term actually means, see e.g. Muhammad Anwar, Jochen Blaschke, and Åke Sander, "State Policies Towards Muslim Minorities: Sweden, Great Britain and Germany" (Berlin: Edition Parabolis, 2004).

<sup>41</sup> In order to become a Muslim, one has to pronounce thrice a *šahādah*. In the case of children born into Muslim families, it is their father (or other close family member in the absence thereof) who is responsible for whispering *šahādah* to their ear. More on the conditions to become a Muslim, see: W. Montgomery Watt, "Conditions of Membership of the Islamic Community," *Studia Islamica* 21 (1964): 5-12.

<sup>42</sup> PEW- Templeton, "Global Religious Futures Project", [http://www.globalreligiousfutures.org/explorer/custom#/?countries=Jordan&question=728&subtopic=31&year=2012&chartType=bar&answer=all&religious\\_affiliation=all&gender=all&age\\_group=all](http://www.globalreligiousfutures.org/explorer/custom#/?countries=Jordan&question=728&subtopic=31&year=2012&chartType=bar&answer=all&religious_affiliation=all&gender=all&age_group=all) (accessed 17 July 2014).

percent<sup>43</sup> and 6 percent of Jordan's population is Christian<sup>44</sup>, not to mention smaller minorities such as Duruz, so this number cannot be treated as fully reliable either. Moreover, the Association of Religion Data Archives estimates that 2.5 percent of Jordanians are agnostics and 0.49 percent are atheists<sup>45</sup>. The UN Special Rapporteur "could not find any precise data, but it seems that the number of reconversions is higher than the number of conversions from Islam. In general, conversions do not take place on a large scale"<sup>46</sup>.

Based on all the above-mentioned numbers, one might carefully estimate that anything between 2 000 (World Value Surveys Wave 4) and 191 000 (ARDA) Jordanians do not "believe in one God, Allah, and his prophet Muhammad"<sup>47</sup>.

### Terminology and Literature Review

The individuals who disaffiliated from Islam without re-affiliating to a new religion will be termed here "deconverts", as opposed to "converts", whom I understand as individuals who abandoned their religion to affiliate with another one. Deconversion will be then understood here as leaving the religious field altogether, and not – unlike in the case of conversion – migrating within it (in a way that Rambo<sup>48</sup> understands the term "apostasy"). Deconversion might of course be a first step in a conversion process, which involves disaffiliation from one religion and the subsequent affiliation with a new one (or re-affiliation with the formerly abandoned one). However, in this paper I shall focus solely on this former phenomenon.

<sup>43</sup> CIA, "The World Factbook. Jordan", <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/jo.html>,%20http://www.icnl.org/research/monitor/jordan.html (accessed 17 July 2014).

<sup>44</sup> The International Center for Not-for-Profit-Law, "Ngo Law Monitor: Jordan" (2015). <http://www.icnl.org/research/monitor/jordan.html> (accessed 17 July 2014).

<sup>45</sup> The Association of Religion Data Archives, "Jordan, Religion and Social Profile" (2015)., [http://www.thearda.com/internationalData/countries/Country\\_119\\_1.asp](http://www.thearda.com/internationalData/countries/Country_119_1.asp) (accessed 16 July 2014).

<sup>46</sup> United Nations Human Rights Council, Report of the Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief, Addendum: Mission to Jordan, 27 January 2014, A/HRC/25/58/Add.2, <http://www.refworld.org/docid/52fa1e214.html> (accessed 16 July 2014).

<sup>47</sup> That is, technically not Muslim. Deliberating on what exactly "being a Muslim" means is beyond the scope of this paper, but it suffices to say that a growing number of individuals consider themselves Muslim, although they do not believe in God – in the literature they are known as "cultural Muslims". For more information about the levels of religiosity in the Kingdom, see for example PEW-Templeton Global Religious Futures Project <http://www.globalreligiousfutures.org/> and World Values Survey [http://www.worldvaluessurvey.org/index\\_html](http://www.worldvaluessurvey.org/index_html). [all accessed 1 May, 2013].

<sup>48</sup> Lewis R. Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion* (Yale University Press, 1995).

For that purpose, I adopt Streib and Keller's<sup>49</sup> conceptualization of deconversion, who – building on studies by Barbour<sup>50</sup> and Glock<sup>51</sup> – proposed five characteristics of deconversion “(1) loss of specific religious experiences, (2) intellectual doubt, denial, or disagreement with specific beliefs, (3) moral criticism, (4) emotional suffering, and (5) disaffiliation from the community”. Their approach is arguably the most appropriate one when it comes to studying deconverts from Islam, as – like Streib<sup>52</sup> himself claims – it does not limit deconversion to the official disaffiliation from a certain religious organization. In the case of Islam, where no formal religious hierarchy exists, there is no organization to withdraw from in the first place. Secondly, and perhaps more importantly, as publicly disaffiliating from Islam may result in civil or physical death, many individuals will not publicly renounce their religion, remaining “in the closet” or revealing their decision just to a small number of trusted people. Treating public and official disaffiliation from religion as the only way to deconvert would therefore effectively exclude the majority of apostates from Islam from the “deconverts” group.

From a theological point of view, both conversion and deconversion falls under the concept of “apostasy” (Arabic *riddah* or *irtidād*). Who exactly should be treated as an “apostate” is disputable, although apart from the obvious cases when an individual voluntarily admits to abandoning Islam, scholars vary in their opinion whether one could still be deemed an apostate in the absence of such a confession. Apostasy, as pointed out in the *Encyclopedia of Islam*, “may be committed verbally by denying a principle of belief or by an action, for example treating a copy of the Quran with disrespect”<sup>53</sup>. Being rather imprecise, the definition leaves room for abuse, and the overuse of this accusation is abundant. This problem seems to have been acknowledged early in the history of Islam, with Al-Ghazālī attempting to “provide a decisive conceptual distinction between apostasy and doctrinal heresy” in his *Fayṣal al-tafriqa bayn al-islām wa-l-zandaqa* (The Distinction Between Islam and Zandaqa/Unbelief).

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<sup>49</sup> Heinz Streib and Barbara Keller, "The Variety of Deconversion Experiences - Contours of a Concept in Respect to Empirical Research," *Archive for the Psychology of Religion* 26, no. 1 (2004): 180-200.

<sup>50</sup> John D. Barbour, *Versions of Deconversion: Autobiography and the Loss of Faith (Studies in Religion and Culture)* (University of Virginia Press, 1994).

<sup>51</sup> Charles Y. Glock, "On the Study of Religious Commitment," *Religious Education: The Official Journal of the Religious Education Association* 57, no. Supplement 4 (1962), 98-110.

<sup>52</sup> Heinz Streib et al., *Deconversion: Qualitative and Quantitative Results from Cross-Cultural Research in Germany and the United States of America (Research in Contemporary Religion)*, trans. James T. Richardson (Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2009).

<sup>53</sup> *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, ed. Brill, vol. VII (Mif-Naz) (Brill, 1998).

This paper, however, deals only with the cases of people who themselves admit to being deconverts (or apostates), and so the above-mentioned issue will not be examined here in a greater detail<sup>54</sup>.

As it can be seen, there is a reasonably rich body of literature on conversion. However, the number of works discussing deconversion in the sense mentioned in the previous section is considerably smaller, with publications on the topic of disaffiliation (be it conversion or deconversion) from Islam being even less abundant. Books presenting opinions of former Muslims, like the one by Crimp and Richardson<sup>55</sup> or by Ibn Warraq<sup>56</sup>, are more often than not fairly critical collections of stories of those who abandoned Islam, rather than rigorous academic studies. The first modern work on apostasy from Islam was completed by a Christian missionary, Zwemer<sup>57</sup>, in 1924. His work, perhaps due to his occupation, suffers however from a significant anti-Islam bias. Similarly, Peters and Vries<sup>58</sup>, who approached the topic from a legal perspective, seem not fully objective and focus on the negative aspects of Islam. At the other end of the spectrum, we have authors trying to prove that apostasy has never been a serious issue in the Muslim world, such as Kraemer<sup>59</sup> or Ahmad<sup>60</sup>. More recently, Ayoub<sup>61</sup>, Griffel<sup>62</sup> and Friedmann<sup>63</sup> approach the topic, discussing the legal and theological side of the problem. Others looked at the issue from a historical perspective. For example, Cook<sup>64</sup> gives an overview of cases of apostasy from Islam until the downfall of

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<sup>54</sup> Ahmad Atif Ahmad, "Al-Ghazālī's Contribution to the Sunnī Juristic Discourses on Apostasy," *Journal of Arabic and Islamic Studies* 7 (2007), 50-73; Rudolph Peters and Gert JJ De Vries, "Apostasy in Islam," *Die Welt des Islams* XVII, no. Issue 1/4 (1976), 1-25.

<sup>55</sup> Susan Crimp and Joel Richardson, eds., *Why We Left Islam* (WND Books, 2008).

<sup>56</sup> Ibn Warraq, *Why I Am Not a Muslim* (Prometheus Books, 2003).

<sup>57</sup> Samuel Zwemer, *The Law of Apostasy in Islam* (Marshall Brothers, 1924).

<sup>58</sup> Peters and De Vries, "Apostasy in Islam."

<sup>59</sup> Joel L Kraemer, "Apostates, Rebels and Brigands," *Israel Oriental Studies* 10 (1980): 34-73.

<sup>60</sup> Sayed Barakat Ahmad, "Conversion from Islam," in *The Islamic World: From Classical to Modern Times (Essays in Honor of Bernard Lewis)*, ed. Clifford Edmund Bosworth, et al. (Darwin Press, 1989), 3-25.

<sup>61</sup> Mahmoud Ayoub, "Religious Freedom and the Law of Apostasy in Islam," *Islamochristiana* 20 (1994): 73-91.

<sup>62</sup> Frank Griffel, "Toleration and Exclusion: Al-Shāfi'ī and Al-Ghazālī on the Treatment of Apostates," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 64, no. 3 (2001), 339-354.

<sup>63</sup> Yohanan Friedmann, *Tolerance and Coercion in Islam: Interfaith Relations in the Muslim Tradition (Cambridge Studies in Islamic Civilization)* (Cambridge University Press, 2003).

<sup>64</sup> Cook, "Apostasy from Islam: A Historical Perspective."

Byzantium, and Simonsohn<sup>65</sup> focuses on those who first embraced Islam, and subsequently reconverted to their original faith in the early years of Islam. El Fegiery<sup>66</sup> and Berger<sup>67</sup>, on the other hand, review the known apostasy cases in Egypt and scrutinize the contemporary Egyptian case law with regard to the conversion from Islam, and mainly to Christianity, and Saeed and Saeed<sup>68</sup>, apart from providing a well-documented theoretical evidence against the punishment for apostasy in Islam, analyse the current laws regarding religious freedom in Malaysia.

A more practical approach was adopted by Johansen<sup>69</sup>, Schielke<sup>70</sup> and Hamad<sup>71</sup>, who studied cases of the breach of religious freedom of apostates in Egypt based on the court records, or an-Na'im<sup>72</sup>, who examined the apostasy case against Mahmoud Muhammad Taha in Sudan. Others, like Khalil and Bilici<sup>73</sup>, examined testimonies of former Muslims. However, their focus was on English-speaking individuals who lived in Western Europe and North America. Moreover, they did not conduct interviews or surveys on their own, but rather focused on testimonies published online or in the available literature. In a more quantitative study, Kevin M. Brice<sup>74</sup> attempted to calculate the number of apostates from Islam in Scotland, based on the national census. Additionally, a small number of unpublished MA and PhD theses on

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<sup>65</sup> Uriel Simonsohn, "'Halting between Two Opinions': Conversion and Apostasy in Early Islam," *Medieval Encounters* 19 (2013): 342-370.

<sup>66</sup> El Fegiery, "Islamic Law and Freedom of Religion: The Case of Apostasy and Its Legal Implications in Egypt."

<sup>67</sup> Berger, "Apostasy and Public Policy in Contemporary Egypt: An Evaluation of Recent Cases from Egypt's Highest Courts."

<sup>68</sup> Saeed and Saeed, *Freedom of Religion, Apostasy and Islam*.

<sup>69</sup> Baber Johansen, "Apostasy as Objective and Depersonalized Fact: Two Recent Egyptian Court Judgments," *Social Research* 70, no. 3 (2003), 687-710.

<sup>70</sup> Samuli Schielke, "Being a Non-Believer in a Time of Islamic Revival: Trajectories of Doubt and Certainty in Contemporary Egypt.," *International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 44, no. 2 (2012), 301-320.

<sup>71</sup> Ahmed Seif al Islam Hamad, "Legal Plurality and Legitimation of Human Rights Abuses: a Case Study of State Council Rulings Concerning the Rights of Apostate", in *Legal Pluralism in the Arab World*, eds. B. Dupret, M. Berger, and L. al-Zwaini, 219-228 (The Hague: Kluwer Law International, 1999).

<sup>72</sup> Abdullahi Ahmed An-Na'im, "The Islamic Law of Apostasy and Its Modern Applicability," *Religion* 16, no. 3 (1986), 197-224.

<sup>73</sup> Mohammad Hassan Khalil and Mucahit Bilici, "Conversion out of Islam: A Study of Conversion Narratives of Former Muslims," *The Muslim World* 97, no. 1 (2007), 111-124.

<sup>74</sup> Kevin M. Brice, "Counting the Converts: Using Data from Scotland's Census 2001," in *Muslims in the UK and in Europe*, I, ed. Yasir Suleiman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 57-67.

communities of apostates can be found. Those include a study on Arabs who converted from Islam to Christianity by Kraft<sup>75</sup> from the University of Bristol, Brink's<sup>76</sup> MA thesis analysing theories of deconversion based on narratives of former Muslims in Great Britain defended at Cambridge University, or a study of the community of ex-Muslims in the United Kingdom by Sidlo<sup>77</sup> from the University of Warsaw. Additionally, a study "The Apostates: A Qualitative Study of Ex-Muslims in Britain", funded by the Economic and Social Research Council, was conducted by Prifysgol Bangor University research team between 01 September 2011 and 30 April 2013. The results of this study will be published by Simon Cottee in 2015 in a book entitled *The Apostates: When Muslims Leave Islam*. Furthermore, a report by Meral<sup>78</sup> published by Christian Solidarity Worldwide is available online. The author managed to interview 28 apostates in Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Nigeria, Turkey and the United Kingdom, all the interviewees were male converts to Christianity, though. Moreover, Brian Whitaker has recently published a book *Arabs Without God: Atheism and Freedom of Belief in the Middle East*, in which he discusses the treatment of apostasy in Islam and describes several cases of former Muslims. His work, however – albeit truly interesting – is more of a journalistic account than an academic publication.

To the best knowledge of the author of this paper, no other study of the apostates in Arab countries have been conducted thus far, and a huge gap in knowledge on deconverts from Islam in the Middle East exist. This paper is an attempt to fill this niche by virtue of surveying Jordan-based former Muslims who abandoned their faith and subsequently had not embraced a new one.

## Method

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<sup>75</sup> Kathryn Ann Kraft, "Community and Identity among Arabs of a Muslim Background Who Choose to Follow a Christian Faith" (PhD thesis, University of Bristol, 2007).

<sup>76</sup> Suzanne Brink, "Losing Faith without Losing Face: Revising the Definition of Deconversion and Investigating the Relationship between Secret Disaffiliation and Health" (unpublished MPhil in Social and Developmental Psychology, University of Cambridge, 2011).

<sup>77</sup> Katarzyna Sidlo, "Działalność Ex-Muzułmanów w Wielkiej Brytanii" (unpublished MA in Oriental Studies, University of Warsaw, 2011).

<sup>78</sup> Ziya Meral, "No Place to Call Home: Experiences of Apostates from Islam, Failures of the International Community" (United Kingdom: Christian Solidarity Worldwide. Voice of the Voiceless, 2008).

The survey, consisting of 20 questions, was posted online in English. It was possible, however, to answer the open-ended questions in any other language of preference, including Arabic, and three participants decided to make use of this option. Respondents were assured of anonymity and of the confidentiality of their answers. At the same time, in order to ensure maximum reliability of the results, repeated filling in of a questionnaire from one IP address was blocked.

The data gathered was subject to both a quantitative and a qualitative analysis. A content analysis was performed on all the answers provided to open-ended questions. Depending on the question, specific codes, numeric or otherwise, were allocated to each activity, state or opinion.

Most of the participants were recruited on the Facebook page *Al-Ilhād wa-l-lādīn fi-l-Urdun* (Atheism and non-belief in Jordan), the access to which was enabled by a person recruited previously via snowball sampling. This fan page was created in 2012 and since its inception until the point when the survey was conducted gathered 2332 “likes”. It has a group of active members who regularly post new content, and according to Facebook statistics, between 178 and 544 people mentioned it online each week during the analysed period of time. A small number of participants were recruited via chain-referral sampling. Because the sample analysed in this paper is based on those whose participation in the survey was self-selected rather than a probability sample, no estimates of sampling error can be calculated and it is not known how representative the sample is of the population under investigation.

Despite the fact that non-probability sampling is less rigorous and accurate than probability sampling, there is a consensus amongst many of the researchers (Leech and Onwuegbuzie<sup>79</sup>, Flint and Atkinson<sup>80</sup>, Faugier and Sargeant<sup>81</sup>, Biernacki and Waldorf<sup>82</sup>, Agadjanian and

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<sup>79</sup> Anthony J. Onwuegbuzie and Nancy L. Leech, “A Call for Qualitative Power Analyses: Considerations in Qualitative Research”, *Quality & Quantity: International Journal of Methodology* 41(2001): 105-121.

<sup>80</sup> Rowland Atkinson and John Flint, “Accessing Hidden and Hard-to-Reach Populations: Snowball Research Strategies”, *Social Research Update* 33 (2001), 1-4.

<sup>81</sup> Jean Faugier and Mary Sargeant, “Sampling Hard to Reach Populations”, *Journal of Advanced Nursing* 26 (1997): 790-797.

<sup>82</sup> Patrick Biernacki and Dan Waldorf, “Snowball Sampling: Problems and Techniques of Chain Referral Sampling”, *Sociological Methods and Research* 10 (1981):141–163.

Zotova<sup>83</sup>, Kalton and Anderson<sup>84</sup>, Sudman<sup>85</sup>) that it is the most feasible and practical method for the study of ‘hidden’ or hard-to-reach populations, that is those that are socially stigmatized or are engaged in illegal behaviour, and are “often difficult to access owing to the threatening nature of the specific trait that characterizes its members.”<sup>86</sup>

Apostates from Islam in general, and apostates from Islam in a predominantly Muslim country in particular, unquestionably do qualify as a ‘hidden’ and hard-to-reach group (some researchers, e.g. Khalil and Bilici<sup>87</sup>, could not complete their studies due to the insufficient numbers of respondents). Although apostasy is technically not outlawed in Jordan, social stigma associated with abandoning one’s religion and the consequences an apostate has to face discourage many people from publicly breaking the taboo surrounding deconversion<sup>88</sup>. Consequently, the choice of non-probability sampling seemed to be the most viable option, allowing to access the largest number of prospective respondents.

As for the limitations of conducting research online, this mode of operation, as opposed to face-to-face interviews, offers respondents greater anonymity. Naturally, this means that only individuals with access to internet could participate in the survey. In defence of online recruitment one might quote, for example, Bainbridge, who analysed internet-based methods of conducting research on religion, and argued that “each technology excludes at least some potential respondents”<sup>89</sup>. Moreover, as noted by the same author, in the case of certain groups, such as atheists, studying smaller, well-targeted samples might be just as useful as conducting research on the basis of bigger samples, gathered using probability-sampling methods – in

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<sup>83</sup> Victora Agadjanian, Natalya Zotova, “Sampling and Surveying Hard-to-Reach Populations for Demographic Research: A Study of Female Labor Migrants in Moscow, Russia”, *Demographic Research* 26,5, (2012): 131-150.

<sup>84</sup> Graham Kalton, Dallas W. Anderson, “Sampling Rare Populations”, *Journal of the Royal Statistical Society* 149 (1986): 65-82.

<sup>85</sup> Seymour Sudman, “On Sampling Very Rare Human Populations”, *Journal of the American Statistical Association* 67 (1972): 335-339.

<sup>86</sup> Faugier and Sargeant, *op.cit.*

<sup>87</sup> Khalil and Bilici, "Conversion out of Islam: A Study of Conversion Narratives of Former Muslims."

<sup>88</sup> Since in the MENA region religion tends to constitute a crucial part of one’s identity, this holds true also for members of other denominations, such as Christianity and Judaism.

<sup>89</sup> Williams Sims Bainbridge, "Internet-Based Research in the Social Science of Religion (Arda Guiding Paper Series)," *State College, PA: The Association of Religion Data Archives at The Pennsylvania State University* (2010), <http://www.thearda.com/rrh/papers/guidingpapers.asp>. (accessed 15 May, 2014).

short “trading the representativeness of the sample against salience of the items for the respondent”<sup>90</sup>.

## Results

### *The Respondent's Profile*

The questionnaire was answered by 130 people. Out of those, the answers of 107 respondents were eligible for analysis<sup>91</sup>. Seventy people (65.4 percent of the participants) chose to answer at least 50 percent of the questions<sup>92</sup>. Slightly more than three quarters of the sample was male (77.6 percent), the rest was female (17.8 percent) (data missing for 4.6 percent of the cases<sup>93</sup>). The age range of the participants was from 15 to 65. The age distribution of female and male respondents was very similar, with both showing the tendency to decline with age. 15.9 percent of respondents were in the age group 15 to 20, 29.9 percent were between 20 and 25, 26.2 percent - between 25 and 30, and 12.1 percent between 30 and 35. Altogether only 15.9 percent of respondents were older than 35 and there was only one woman in this group. The majority of participants were single (71 percent), 17.8 percent reported being married, with only one woman being in this group), and 10.3 percent being engaged or in a relationship (data missing for 0.9 percent of the cases). All respondents were born in a Muslim family.

When compared to the general Jordanian public, the age and gender distributions among respondents were biased towards unmarried men in their twenties (see Table 1). One reason for that might be the mode of recruitment used in the study, i.e. self-selection based on an advertisement posted on the Facebook page *Al-Ilhād wa-l-lādīn fī-l-Urdun* (Atheism and non-belief in Jordan). Internet users in general, and Facebook users in particular (and especially in the Middle East), tend to belong to the younger generation. According to the United Nations,

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<sup>90</sup> Ibid.

<sup>91</sup> That is, at least 4 questions from the survey were answered and the respondents were apostates from Islam, born into Muslim families, who did not convert to another religion.

<sup>92</sup> One of the possible reasons for this fairly low response rate might have been the language of instruction. The questions were originally designed in English for the purpose of carrying out face-to-face interviews. While those were in progress, an opportunity to post the survey online and reach much wider population emerged. Consequently, the questions were posted in their original form in order not to create any bias. Respondents, however, did have the opportunity to reply in any language of their choice, including Arabic, and some respondents chose this option.

<sup>93</sup> Due to rounding up, the numbers may not always add up exactly to 100.

35 percent of Jordanians had access to internet in 2011<sup>94</sup>. In 2013, the degree of internet accessibility stood at 44.2 percent, and 39.3 percent of the population used Facebook (there were 2 558 140 Facebook users). Slightly higher numbers were reported by the Jordanian Telecommunications Regulatory Commission<sup>95</sup>, which claimed that in the first quarter of 2013, 69 percent of Jordanians had internet access. At the same time, according to Socialbakers, a social media analytics company, in March 2013 there were 2,7 million Facebook users in Jordan (which equals around 43 percent of population)<sup>96</sup>. Half of them (50 percent) were under 24 years of age, while those between 25-34 constituted 27.5 percent of all users. More than half of Facebook users (58 percent) were male. Being young and unmarried would not only mean being more likely to use Facebook, but also – having more time to actively engage in the internet community, and to fill in online questionnaires. What follows is that the profile of the respondent of this particular survey does not necessarily reflect the profile of the average Jordanian ex-Muslim, but rather the profile of ex-Muslims actively involved in atheists'/disaffiliates' movement (more about that limitation can be found in discussion section).

A parallel explanation for the unusual profile of Jordanian in this survey (as opposed to the general population) might be that disaffiliating from Islam may be the cause of the prolonged period of staying unmarried. Indeed, according to Islamic law, a Muslim woman can only marry a Muslim man, and although a Muslim man can marry a Christian or a Jew, marrying an atheist is off limits. Even if an apostate remains “in the closet”, he or she may feel uneasy about marrying a religious person. Another possible explanation is the socio-economic background of the participants. Jordanian with access to a computer and to the internet tend to come from more affluent families, which usually marry-off their offspring at a later age compared to poorer parents.

### *Religiosity*

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<sup>94</sup>"Undata | Record View | Internet Users," Unit, <http://data.un.org/Data.aspx?q=Jordan+internet&d=SOWC&f=inID%3a72%3bcrID%3a328>. Accessed 28 May, 2015.

<sup>95</sup>"Telecommunications Regulatory Commission (Trc) Website," [http://www.trc.gov.jo/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=2603&Itemid=0\(=english](http://www.trc.gov.jo/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=2603&Itemid=0(=english). Accessed 28 May, 2014.

<sup>96</sup>"Socialbakers | Social Media Report for Facebook Pages in Jordan (Feb 2013)!", <http://trendingdig.com/socialbakers-social-media-report-for-facebook-pages-in-jordan/>. Accessed 17 April, 2014.

In total, 57.9 percent of those surveyed (or 68.9 percent of those who answered the question) turned to agnosticism or atheism after leaving Islam, with the remaining persons being “undecided”, “secular”, “spiritual” or “deist”. Out of those, 13.3 percent were considering converting to another religion a possibility<sup>97</sup>, while 61 percent was positive they would remain agnostic or atheist (with missing replies in 25.6 percent of the cases)<sup>98</sup>. There was no correlation between the respondents’ religiosity prior to leaving Islam and their answer to that question. Similarly, gender was not an important variable here. Therefore, the average respondent was a single, brought up in a Muslim family male under the age of 30, who upon disaffiliation from Islam became an atheist and was committed to remaining one. To put those findings in a context in terms of the trajectories of conversion proposed by Streib<sup>99</sup>, the vast majority of interviewees chose what was branded as a “secular exit”, characterized by “loss of belief in God and self-identification as neither religious or a spiritual person”. Those who called themselves “spiritual” or “deist” could fit into the description “privatizing exit”, involving “continuous belief in God and self-identification as a religious person”.

For answers to open-ended questions “How religious were you before you left Islam?” and “Is your family religious?”, codes 0,1,2,3 were allocated (standing for “not religious”, “moderately religious”, “religious” and “very religious” respectively). Subsequently, a numeric variable was created to show the distance between the level of the respondent’s religiosity and the religiosity of their family.

The most striking observation is that more than half of the respondents (58.8 percent) who provided an answer to the question about their religiosity before disaffiliating from Islam (the response rate was 64.5 percent) described themselves as “religious” or “very religious”. As indicated in Figure 1, men used to be more religious than women, despite the fact that on the average, they were more likely to be brought up in a religious or a very religious family only by 11 percentage points.

As for the derived variable, it was created to assess the strength of influence that the family had on a respondent when it comes to religious devotion. The further away the value from

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<sup>97</sup> Those results are rather unlike findings of the International Social Survey Programme (ISSP), Religion III, according to which roughly 60 percent of deconverts still believed in God and were in search for a new religion, or at least self-identified themselves as “spiritual”.

<sup>98</sup> The numbers do not always add up to one since some respondents may have chosen to omit the question.

<sup>99</sup> Heinz Streib, “Deconversion,” in *The Oxford Handbook on Religious Conversion*, eds. Lewis R. Rambo and Charles E. Farhadian (Oxford University Press, 2014), 271-296.

zero, the weaker the family's impact on the interviewee's level of religiosity; respondents who scored minus three were significantly more devout than their relatives and those who scored plus three – significantly less. Figure 2 shows those values in absolute terms. As it can be seen, men were, as compared to women, 60 percent less likely to significantly divert (scores 2 and 3) from the family's general level of religiousness.

None of the respondents scored four or minus four, which means there were no cases of extreme disparity between the respondent's and the family's beliefs. That said, 7 percent of those surveyed were quite visibly more devout, and 23 percent – visibly less devout than the rest of the members of their household. On average, the most common result was to be only slightly more (27 percent) or less (16 percent) religious than the family of origin (in total 43 percent of those who answered both questions).

### *Reasons for Leaving Islam*

The question "Could you please explain why have you decided to leave Islam?" was an open-ended one. Respondents might have provided as many reasons for disaffiliating from Islam as they wished. The answers were subsequently grouped into two main clusters: reasons directly related to Islam and those related to the general idea of religion. Using the methodology applied by Khalil and Bilici<sup>100</sup>, the former were then divided into two sub-clusters: intellectual/ideological and social/experiential. Within each of those clusters answers were once again grouped into smaller categories: nine of those could be identified for intellectual/ideological sub-cluster, and three for the social/experiential cluster.

As it can be seen from Table 2, one in five persons (21 percent) who answered the question related their criticism towards all religions in general as a reason for abandoning Islam. A slightly smaller number (18 percent) quoted their lack of belief in God. Out of those who chose one (or both) of these, 40 percent did not mention any other reason. This could suggest that this group of respondents would form the most "hardcore" atheists segment in the sample. However, they were in fact slightly more open to the idea of embracing another religion in the future (15 percent versus 13.3 percent in the entire population under investigation), pointing to certain inconsistency in their answers.

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<sup>100</sup> Khalil and Bilici, "Conversion out of Islam: A Study of Conversion Narratives of Former Muslims."

The large discrepancy between the frequency with which “social/experimental” and “intellectual/ideological” were quoted as reasons suggests that it is Islam per se, and not Muslims as people, that is being blamed for things such as bad treatment of women or inciting to violence. This is fairly intuitive – a person critical of his or her religion, but having no intention of abandoning it, would most likely blame all such things on people distorting the true message of a given religion.

As it can be seen from Table 3, the most popular reason for abandoning Islam, quoted by 61.8 percent of those who responded to the question was its being illogical and unscientific. This appeared to be equally important to females and males, with response rates 61.5 percent and 62.7 percent respectively. Those proportions were significantly different for the next two most often quoted reasons – “Islam as illogical and unscientific” and “the status of women in Islam”; those were chosen by 46.2 percent and 38.5 percent of women, and 17.6 percent and 7.8 percent of men respectively. Altogether, women were twice as likely to quote the “humanitarian” reasons (number 2,3,4 and 8) than men.

The few people who quoted “social/experiential motivations”, mentioned the bad state of Muslim societies, Muslims being in a state of illusion regarding their own religion and Muslims being oppressive (three, two and two persons, respectively).

The analysis of the gathered data indicates that there is a correlation between the respondent’s rationale for disaffiliating from Islam and their religiosity prior to doing so. Being religious, even moderately, increased the probability that a given person would quote Islam’s illogicality or its incompatibility with science (see Figure 3). This holds true for 57 percent of the formerly religious, 61 percent of the formerly very religious and 71 percent of the moderately religious respondents, whereas it was important to only 36 percent of those who self-described themselves as “not religious” prior to reconvertng from Islam. More religious respondents would also more often admit having read a lot about Islam prior to making a decision about abandoning Islam. Similarly, the more devout the family of origin of the respondent, the more likely they were to quote purely intellectual motivations, i.e. Islam’s incompatibility with science and logical thinking, and less – humanitarian ones (see Table 4).

Altogether, it appears that gender did not influence the respondent deeming “intellectual” reasons as important, whereas their and their families’ religiosity did. At the same time, both religiosity and gender had an influence on the person’s evaluation of “humanitarian” reasons. No clear patterns could be established in relation to a person’s gender and/or religiosity and

their quoting neither socially/experientially motivated reasons, nor those not directly related to Islam.

### **Life after Apostasy**

The questions “Did your life change after you left Islam?” and “How do you feel about leaving Islam? Did your feelings change over time?” were open-ended ones and respondents were encouraged to share their experiences. Out of those who replied to those questions (61.7 percent of all participants), 78.8 percent described some kind of positive feelings – 53.9 percent felt “happier”, 69.2 percent – “more free”, and 7.7 percent experienced relief (although one in five admitted those came after some initial period of anger, anxiety, confusion or frustration; this was reported by slightly more women [23.1 percent] than men [18 percent]). At the same time, 22.7 percent of the respondents believed they were worse off socially – either because they were harassed by their families/friends or were cut out from them, or because they could not tell anyone about their deconversion (although even those, who did not know any other apostates, were more than twice as likely to report positive than negative feelings). Moreover, there was no correlation between the respondents’ level of religiosity prior to leaving Islam and their experienced after deconversion, neither did it seem to be related to their families’ levels of devoutness.

What could be observed, though, was that when asked about reasons behind their apostasy, respondents who quoted reasons related directly to Islam were by 10 percentage points more likely to report positive changes in their lives than those who questioned all religions in general. Moreover, those quoting humanitarian reasons were more likely to experience positive internal feeling compared to those who were mostly concerned with Islam being “unscientific” (92.3 percent versus 76.2 percent). At the same time, though, they reported feeling that social-wise they were worse off (by 10.8 percentage points).

Female respondents reported more than twice than male respondents feeling “more free”, and 40 percent more likely to feel “happier” than they used to be prior to apostasy. At the same time, however, they experienced more confusion/anger/anxiety at the initial stages of their deconversion, and were just as likely as men to experience the negative social consequences of their decision. Although their positive internal feelings might be easily explained, especially in the light of how many of them quote the treatment of women in Islam as one of the reasons for their apostasy, the social part is more puzzling.

Women in Arab societies are under much higher pressure than men to behave in a pious and modest way. In Jordan, despite its image as a progressive country, 95 percent Jordanians feel belief in God is a prerequisite for being a good and moral person,<sup>101</sup> and 66 percent think it is permissible to kill a female relative should she “dishonour” the family (19 percent believe it is permissible also in case of a male family member)<sup>102</sup>. The relatively high level of openness about their deconversion and the low number of those who believed their lives somehow changed for the worse might indicate that the women who chose to participate in the study came from more privileged and liberal – although not more secular – backgrounds.

Slightly more than 15 percent (15.1) of the respondents claimed their lives had not changed at all. The reasons for that were twofold: on the one hand, they were “never religious so there wasn't a big change in (my) life style”, on the other - they could not “tell anyone that (they) no longer believe”. It is worth noticing, though, that the latter was also quoted by five respondents as the factor negatively influencing their lives. The fear of being “killed or at least be outcasted (sic!) by everyone” has also been mentioned, although there was no strong correlation between the answers to this question and the question about the number of people informed about abandoning Islam.

On the whole, the majority of the respondents who answered the question believed that abandoning Islam changed their lives, especially their inner lives, for the better. This positive effect was observed more often by female than by male respondents, and the religiosity of the respondents and of their families did not seem to play a role here.

### **Disclosing Apostasy**

Three out of four respondents (76.5 percent) disclosed their apostasy to at least one person (data missing for 36.4 percent of the cases). The level of secrecy varied by gender - on average, men were less likely to inform anyone about their decision to abandon Islam than women (15.4 percent of female and 25.0 percent of male respondents kept their decision secret).

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<sup>101</sup> James Bell et al., *The World's Muslims: Religion, Politics and Society*, Pew Research Center's Forum on Religion & Public Life (2013). Accessed 1 May, 2013.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid.

Interestingly enough, 92 percent of those who told at least one person about their deconversion knew other apostates. Even more curious, though, is the fact that the same was claimed by 77 percent of those respondents, who never revealed their deconversion to anyone. This might suggest that the latter group “knows” other apostates mainly online (which was expressly stated by six respondents; after all, the respondents were recruited through the fan-page of a virtual community). The fact that the vast majority of respondents know other people who also abandoned Islam indicates they form a particular kind of community and tend to look for each other’s company, many a time in a virtual world, which is probably related to the stigma and punishments associated with apostasy. Indeed, 68.8 percent of those, who never told anyone about their apostasy did so because they feared for their lives, while 38 percent wanted to avoid problems. 13 percent claimed they did not want to make their families feel bad.

Quite unexpectedly, only one woman quoted fear for her life as a reason for not telling anyone about her apostasy, while among the male respondents there were 10 men (76.9 percent of male respondents who answered this question) who did so. Combined with the fact that female respondents tended to be more open about disaffiliating from Islam (84.6 percent versus 75.0 percent), this does raise an interesting question of why women seem to be less afraid to talk about leaving Islam. However, due to the sampling method used and the relatively small size of the sample no generalizations about the situation of female apostates in Jordan can be made, and further research is required.

There appears to be some correlation between reasons behind one’s apostasy and their willingness to disclose it<sup>103</sup>. The smallest difference could be observed between those who quoted reasons not related directly to Islam, and those referred directly to it (73 percent of the former and 70 percent of the latter informed at least one person about their decision). Within the latter group, respondents whose motivations were of intellectual/ideological nature were somehow more open about their decision than those who mentioned social/experiential ones (74 percent and 67 percent, respectively). In general, the least willing to inform anyone about their decision were those who quoted reasons of humanitarian nature (57 percent).

Looking at the data in terms of gender divisions, a clear trend might be observed. Virtually all the women who quoted reasons not related directly to Islam told at least one person about

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<sup>103</sup> However, it is important to remember that the question about the reasons behind one’s apostasy was an open one, and many respondents quoted more than one reason.

their apostasy, whereas the same was true only for half of those whose motivations were of social/experimental nature. A similarly large gap exists between men who expressed general critique towards all religions and those who quoted humanitarian reasons (87 percent and 57 percent respectively).

There did not seem to be any correlation between the level of religiosity of the family of origin and the respondent's resolution to share their decision with a friend, partner or a member of the family. Formerly religious as well as irreligious respondents were equally likely to disclose their apostasy.

The reactions of friends and relatives on hearing the news about the respondent's apostasy varied greatly and the majority of the interviewees reported receiving mixed responses, ranging from congratulations to finishing relationships, and attempts to convince them to come back to Islam. Overall, out of 76.5 percent of respondents who decided to share their decision to disaffiliate from Islam with at least one person, 60 percent (73 percent of the women and 56 percent of the men) was met with gradual acceptance. Another 13 percent experienced negative reactions, and one in three respondents believed their friends and/or families were worried about them and felt the pressure to come back to Islam. As compared to the male respondents, female respondents turned out to be more inclined to tell some of their friends or relatives about their decision, and less likely to feel that disclosing their apostasy puts their lives in danger.

### **The Law Regarding Apostasy**

As expected, all respondents who answered the question about the law regarding apostasy expressed utmost "concern", "anger" and "disgust" at the treatment of those who decide to abandon Islam. However, only one person admitted knowing the exact law applicable in Jordan and 14 respondents explicitly stated they were not familiar with it.

This might be interpreted as evidence that apostates in Jordan are not afraid of the persecution on the part of the state, but rather on the part of the society. This claim may be supported by the answers to some of the previous questions. For example, none of the respondents quoted fear of being legally prosecuted as a reason for not disclosing their apostasy, but 38 percent stated they wanted to avoid problems with society, 13 percent did not want to lose or hurt their relatives, and 68.8 percent were afraid of getting killed. Additionally, the very fact that

only one person took the trouble to look up the official position of the state on the apostasy suggests that they do not feel threatened by the security forces. The official data on the number of apostasy cases also suggests that apostasy is – rather similar to the so called “honour killings” – dealt with inside one’s family or community.

## Discussion

The main findings of this research were threefold. Firstly, the most common reasons for disaffiliating from Islam among the respondents turned out to be the lack of logic in Islam, the fact that it contravenes science and its inhumane nature. Intellectual/ideological motives were more than nine times as often quoted as the ones belonging to social/experiential category. Quite interestingly, the more observant the respondent used to be, the more importance they attached to breaches of logic and inconsistencies with scientific understanding. Spending one’s childhood in religious surroundings seemed to have the same effect. A possible explanation for this phenomenon could be that exceptionally devout people tend to be strongly attached to religious dogmas and rarely question them. Consequently, should they encounter proofs to the effect that what they had learned from the Quran or Sunna was wrong, their disillusionment and disenchantment are bound to be graver than in the case of those participants who used to be less concerned with religion. A number of respondents mentioned “lies like miracles” as the motive behind their apostasy. One person cited “myths it (Islam) contain like (jinn) the demons, evil and witches other non-scientific stuff like Adam and eve, Noah ark, the flat earth, the sky that hold above us with no pillars and the stars that god only created to decorate this tent like skies, the contradiction in the book (...)”, another wrote: “Reading scientific articles, I found the size and mysteries of the universe so profound that it belittled any myth religion taught about how special man is in the eyes of a god that cares what foot we enter the bathroom with”<sup>104</sup>.

It might be interesting to compare their testimonies with the narratives of those apostates who converted to other religions in order to establish whether their reasons for disaffiliating fall within the same categories or if they vary significantly. It might be expected that converts to Christianity or Buddhism will not quote losing belief in god or the conviction that all religions are man-made. However, it may be worth examining which factors - intellectual or social ones - were pivotal in the decision-making for each of the groups.

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<sup>104</sup> The original punctuation and spelling was retained.

The second main finding was that the average respondent was a single male in his twenties. A fact worth noting is that the majority of the respondents used to be “religious” or “very religious” prior to disaffiliating from Islam and that the male participants on average were more devout than the female ones. Moreover, most of the participants come from “religious” or “very religious” families and would be only slightly more or slightly less observant than their relatives. The fact that the majority of apostates who participated in the survey and answered questions on religiosity came from quite religious backgrounds and used to be religious themselves should be interpreted extremely cautiously, though. Firstly, one needs to remember that Islam is more than a religion for most of the Muslims, it is part of their cultural identity and a way of life. Secondly, respondents described themselves as “very religious”, “religious” “moderately religious”, “not very religious” or “not religious at all”. Consequently, what one person considers particularly observant another might consider merely moderately adhering to the prescriptions of Islam. Although the exact question reads: “How religious were you before you left Islam? (if possible, please elaborate a bit on what does being religious mean to you)”, not all the participants provided explanations as to why they believed they belonged to a particular group. The answers gathered offer an insight into this problem, though. One of the female participants wrote: “I used to (be) fairly religious, I wore the hijab actually”, while another stated “I used to wear Hijab and pray, but not too religious”. Another respondent, who described himself as “not very religious” explained that he “did the daily 5 prayer, didn't drink”, yet at the same time another one wrote “Prayed all the 5 prayers yup I was religious”. Those are but a few examples. Nonetheless, they do illustrate quite clearly how complex the issue of self-perception is when it comes to religiosity. A more objective way of establishing the level of devoutness might be beneficial for the veracity of the results of any further research.

Finally, the analysis of the data indicates that women apostates are not only more likely to believe that their lives changed for the better after they abandoned Islam, but they are also more open about their decision to deconvert. Moreover, and perhaps most strikingly, they are less afraid that disclosing their apostasy might put their lives in danger. This matter needs further investigation since the available evidence suggests the opposite. Women in Jordan continue to be under huge societal and family pressure to conform to social norms of behaviour<sup>105</sup>. According to Human Rights Watch, at least 25 women a year there fall victim to

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<sup>105</sup> For instance, 80 percent of Jordanians believe that a wife must always obey her husband, only 22 percent think a woman should have the right to divorce her husband and a mere 34 percent said honour crime is never

the so-called “honour killings”. Those numbers are most probably much higher, though, as this type of crime more often than not goes unreported<sup>106</sup>. A woman or a girl who is believed to have had engaged in pre- or extra-marital sexual intercourse is under a real danger of being murdered by relatives, who are convinced this is the only way of restoring “family honour”. A female member of family who is considered “immoral” brings shame to the whole clan. As a recent study by PEW Research Centre shows, Muslims in general, and Jordanians in particular, strongly associate being “moral” with being “religious” - 95 percent of Jordan’s population thinks it is necessary to believe in God to be moral<sup>107</sup>. Consequently, an atheist is popularly believed to be devoid of moral restraints. A sample of 20 women who participated in the study cannot be deemed representative of the entire population of female apostates in Jordan, though, and further research into this matter is thus highly recommended.

There were a number of limitations to the current study, the most important of them being the sampling method. The participants of the study were recruited via the Facebook group *Al-Ilhād wa-l-lādīn fī-l-Urdun* (Atheism and non-belief in Jordan) and the survey was posted online in English, which means that (i) they had access to computer, and do not therefore come from the lowest strata of the population, (ii) they consider their deconversion important enough to engage in online discussions or at least to follow what others have written, and (iii) they speak English well enough to understand the questions. Moreover, the response rate to some of the questions was relatively low and in some instances as few as 50 percent of all respondents provided an answer. This in turn means that the results were even less representative. Overall, it cannot be emphasized enough that the limited size of the study and the used non-probability sampling method imply that the results of this study cannot and should not be considered necessarily representative of the population under investigation.

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permissible when it is a female who committed a crime (with regard to male offenders this number rises to 81 percent). *The World Muslims: Religion, Politics and Society*, PEW Research Center, The PEW Forum on Religion and Public Life 2013, 89-94 <http://www.pewforum.org/2013/04/30/the-worlds-muslims-religion-politics-society-exec/> (accessed 01 May 2013).

<sup>106</sup> Human Rights Watch, “Jordan: Tribunals No Substitute for Reforms on ‘Honor Killings’ Changes to Penal Code Needed to Help Save Women’s Lives”, 8 September, 2009, <http://www.hrw.org/news/2009/09/01/jordan-tribunals-no-substitute-reforms-honor-killings> (accessed 1 May, 2013).

<sup>107</sup> PEW Research Center “World’s Muslims: Religion, Politics and Society”.

## Conclusion

This paper examines the online community of apostates in Jordan. Although the sample analysed consisted of just 107 people, this number is not only much higher than the average response rate to this type of study, but it also indicates that apostasy among Muslims is much more prevalent than it might be popularly assumed. The problem of those who disaffiliated from Islam thus far gained attention mainly from journalists, activists, and populist politicians – when it was deemed useful. More rigorous, scientific research is needed on this issue in order to raise awareness about the problematic situation of former Muslims.

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## TABLES, FIGURES, AND IMAGES

Table 1. Comparison between demographics of respondents and demographics of Jordanian population.

	Jordan	Test group
<b>age</b>		
(15-20>	11%	15.9%
(20-25>	10.6%	29.9%
(25-30>	8.9%	26.2%
(30-35>	7.8%	12.1%
35+	30.7%	15.9%
<b>gender</b>		
male	51.6%	77.6%
female	48.4%	17.8%
<b>marital status (persons under 35)</b>		
<b>married</b>		
male	82.8%	11.6%
female	94.2%	5.6%
<b>single</b>		
male	17.2%	88.4%*
female	5.8%	94.4%

*Source:* Department of Statistics, Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan

[http://www.dos.gov.jo/dos\\_home\\_e/main/Demograghy/2012/2-5.pdf](http://www.dos.gov.jo/dos_home_e/main/Demograghy/2012/2-5.pdf)

[http://www.dos.gov.jo/dos\\_home\\_e/main/vitality/Marriage\\_and\\_Divorce/2011/Marriages8.pdf](http://www.dos.gov.jo/dos_home_e/main/vitality/Marriage_and_Divorce/2011/Marriages8.pdf)

\*Answers “engaged”, “in a relationship” or “divorced” are being counted as “single”, since people not in marital relationship are officially treated as ones in Jordan.

Figure 1. Religiosity by gender

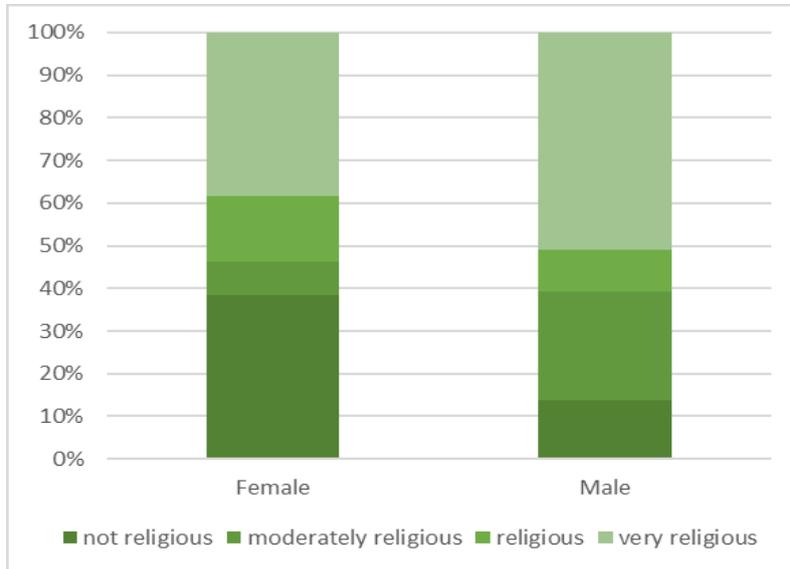


Figure 2. Difference between reported family's and self-reported religiosity prior to deconversion

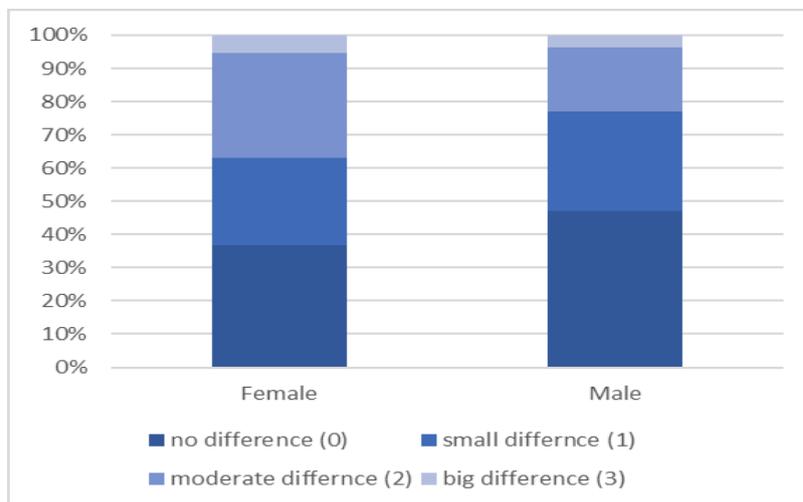


Table 2. Reasons for abandoning Islam

	Female	Male	Total*
Not related directly to Islam			
Critique directed at all religions (man-made, only aim to control people)	31%	18%	21%
God does not exist	8%	14%	18%
Related directly to Islam			
Intellectual/Ideological Motivations	100%	84%	85%
Social/Experiential Motivations	15%	6%	9%

\*including those who did not specify their gender

Table 3. "Intellectual/ideological" reasons for abandoning Islam

	female	male	total*
1. Islam as illogical and unscientific	8	32	42
2. The contradiction between sharia and human rights	6	9	15
3. The status of women in Islam	5	4	10
4. Islam calls for violence and hatred	1	9	10
5. The unnecessary, strict rules and expectations of Islam	3	3	6
6. Islam as not universal, but rather Arab-centric	1	3	4
7. The character of the Prophet and other Muslim leaders	1	3	4
8. The eternal damnation of good non-Muslims	0	2	2
9. The dubious historicity of the Qur'an and Hadith	0	1	1
total	25	66	

\*including those who did not specify their gender

Figure 3. Correlation between religiosity and reasons for abandoning Islam

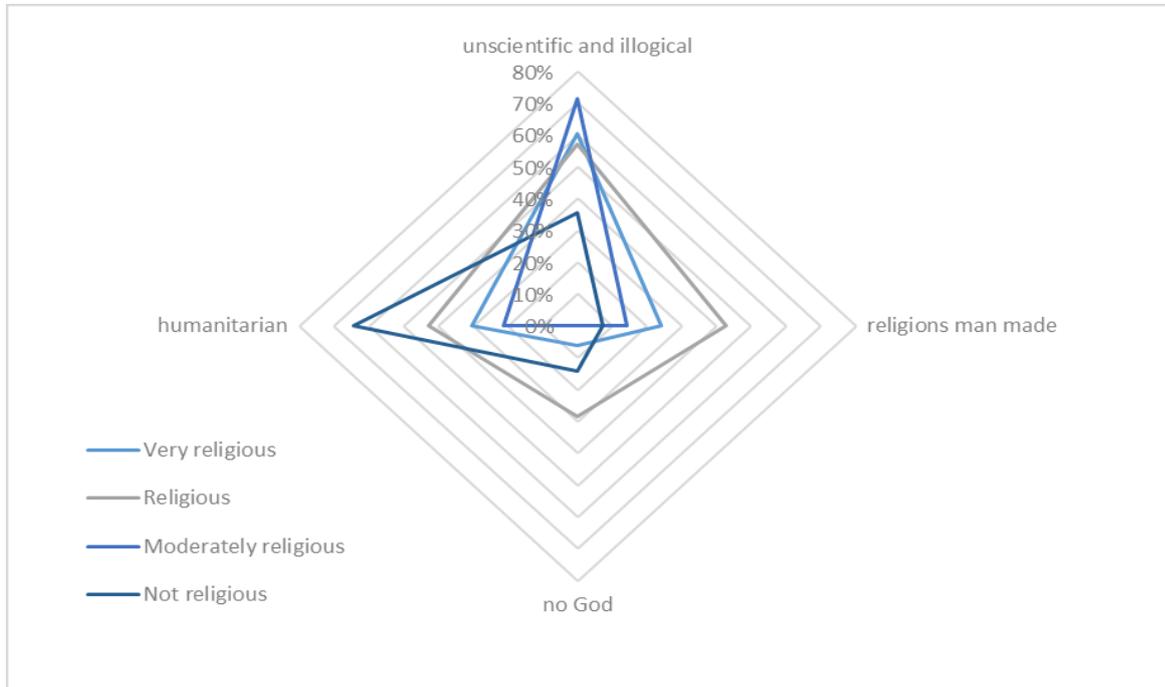


Table 4. Correlation between family's self-perceived religiosity and reasons for abandoning Islam

	Very religious	Religious	Moderately religious	Not religious
unscientific and illogical	57%	61%	79%	20%
humanitarian	29%	39%	36%	60%

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Katarzyna W. Sidło is a final-year PhD candidate at the Faculty of Oriental Studies at the University of Warsaw, Poland, and a Research Associate at CASE – Center for Social and Economic Research, a Warsaw-based think-tank. She has studied in a number of countries, including Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, United Kingdom, and Poland. Educated at the University of Warsaw, the School of Oriental and African Studies, and the University of Jordan, she holds a B.Sc. in Economics and a M.A. in Arabic and Islamic Studies. Recently, she spent six months as a Visiting Scholar at the University of Cambridge. Ms. Sidło is an author of a number of publications and a contributor to online editions of news and opinion outlets, such as *Russia Direct* (by Foreign Policy), *Spot On* (by the National Bank of Poland), and the *World Commerce Review*. She also works on the Political Economy of the MENA region.