

Christian writer's murder in Jordan reveals conflict on free speech, religion

by [Taylor Luck](#) in the [October 25, 2016](#) issue

[\(The Christian Science Monitor\)](#) The assassination of a Jordanian writer facing charges of blasphemy placed a spotlight on Jordan's careful balance between respect for religion and freedom of speech.

Nahed Hattar, a controversial columnist and writer, was gunned down by a Jordanian national on September 25 as he entered an Amman court to face trial over sharing a cartoon on Facebook deemed insulting to Islam.

The cartoon depicted an Arab man in bed with two women ordering God to bring him wine, under the title "the God of Daesh," or the so-called Islamic State.

It sparked public outrage and led Jordan's prime minister, Hani al-Mulki, to direct authorities to jail the writer for two weeks. Hattar made a conditional apology—saying "I apologize and don't apologize," stressing that he did not intend to insult Islam, but rather IS. He also accused Islamists of using the issue to persecute him.

When it comes to prosecuting individuals for insulting religion, Jordan often finds itself caught between two dynamics: a largely conservative society demanding justice and international commitments to human rights.

Upholding religion helps unify the nation, and both Muslim and Christian Jordanians say they want religious symbols to remain protected from "insults." At times, the country has gone along, prosecuting offenders as a way of preventing sectarian tensions from escalating. But the courts have thrown out the vast majority of such cases and handed out minimum sentences in the remainder of them.

The balancing act is most clearly seen in the actions of King Abdullah, a descendant of the prophet Muhammad. He has been outspoken in his support for freedom of expression. In January 2015, Abdullah and Queen Rania took part in a massive rally in support of free speech in Paris in the wake of the *Charlie Hebdo* killings. The satirical left-wing magazine had published several cartoons mocking Muhammad.

But the king has also repeatedly spoken out against insults to religion and has expressed support for a United Nations resolution against attacks on Islam, its prophets, and other religions. He has also noted that vilifying a religion could not be justified by freedom of expression.

Jordan's catering to religious sensitivities extends to its 200,000 Christians.

In 2006, Jordan banned the film *The DaVinci Code* following complaints from church leaders. In April, the government banned a performance by the Lebanese group Mashrou' Leila after objections to its alleged "misuse of religious symbols of the Christian faith" and intent to perform on Good Friday.

In the country's penal code, Jordan has two articles criminalizing "inciting sectarian strife" and "defamation of religion," with the crimes carrying prison sentences ranging from three months to three years.

Yet Jordan has seen only a handful of cases go before the court over the past five years, usually ending in acquittals or, at worst, light sentences.

"The government in Jordan wants to be seen as making a stand and calming public outcry when these issues come up, but they don't like the idea of long trials and media circuses," said Adam Coogle, Middle East researcher for Human Rights Watch. "Jordan likely charged Hattar in order to calm local tensions, but any case involving defamation of religion can stigmatize individuals and make them targets for vigilante reprisals."

It is largely believed among analysts and officials that Hattar, who had previously been jailed for insulting the king, would have most likely received a light sentence to make a statement to the public that justice had been served.

Yet by charging people such as Hattar with blasphemy—an incident that makes front-page news—some say Jordan is making people targets for extremists.

"The prime minister was the first one who incited against Nahed when he ordered his arrest and put him on trial for sharing the cartoon, and that ignited the public against him and led to his killing," said Saad Hattar, a cousin of the writer, in a statement to Al Jazeera.

The balancing act is never easy.

“Christians and Muslims in Jordan are united in this respect,” said Audeh Quawas, a former Christian member of parliament and a World Council of Churches official. “We want to see both personal freedoms and religious symbols protected to allow everyone to live in harmony.”

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