



TOLERANCE OR EXPLOITATION?

SAUDI ARABIA'S RELIGIOUS DIALOGUE IN MADRID



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Introduction

The government of Saudi Arabia will soon be hosting an interfaith dialogue in Madrid, inviting representatives from several religions. The initial announcement of King Abdullah declared his intention to “meet with our brothers from other religions, including those of the Torah and the Gospel to come up with ways to safeguard humanity”¹, and address many concerns: “I have noticed that the family system has weakened and that atheism has increased. That is an unacceptable behavior to all religions, to the Koran, the Torah and the Bible. We ask God to save humanity. There is a lack of ethics, loyalty and sincerity for our religions and humanity.”² The impending conference - in its location, representation, and agenda – risks dramatically falling short of these lofty goals, and seeming more like a public relations exercise by the Saudi government.

Saudi Policies

It is Saudi Arabia, not Spain, that presently suffers from both its image and practice with its religious intolerance. Thus choosing to hold this conference away from Saudi Arabia begs the question: “why Madrid”. The Saudi government chose Madrid as a venue to avoid holding this conference inside their country. This conference is clearly intended for Western consumption, while preventing its positive fallout from impacting the heart of the Saudi system. The Saudi monarch sponsored two major conferences - one on terrorism in Riyadh in 2005 and another on Energy in Jeddah last month. Holding this conference in Spain indicates Saudi Arabia would prefer not to have its domestic human and religious rights record called into question.

The Saudi government is wise to fear such questions. Freedom of religion, as understood by the international community, does not exist in Saudi Arabia. Non-Wahhabi Muslims and non-Muslims in the kingdom are prohibited from practicing their faith openly.

Saudi Arabia, as are most countries in the world, is home to a diverse population of Sunni, Shi’a and Sufi Muslims, and thousands of Christian, Jewish, Hindu and other expatriates. Yet the Saudi government effectively recognizes only one “right” way to believe – that of Wahhabi Muslims – and suppresses all others. Freedom of religion, defined by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights as the right to “freedom of thought, conscience and religion”, including the right to change religions, and practice openly in private or in public, simply does not exist in Saudi Arabia and is in fact prohibited by many of the kingdom’s laws.

The official religion of KSA is Islam, and the law proscribes that all Saudi citizens must be Muslim. Conversion from Islam is an offense punishable by death under Saudi law. There is no legal recognition or protection for freedom of religion, and non-Wahhabi

¹ <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/comment/faith/article3620897.ece>

² <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/comment/faith/article3620897.ece>

Muslims (including Shi'a and non-Wahhabi Sunni sects) and non-Muslims are severely restricted from practicing their faith.

An example of this is that of Hadi Saeed Al-Mutif, a 17 year old Ismaili Shia when he was arrested in 1993, and has since been sentenced to death after he was accused of apostasy. During his "trial" he was denied any legal assistance whatsoever. He remains in solitary confinement in Asir maximum security prison after he was transferred in June from solitary confinement in Najran prison. King Abdulla continues to refuse to order the release of Hadi, or issue a pardon despite hundreds of requests by the family, human rights activists, and the Vatican. Meanwhile, King Abdullah has ordered the release of two Turkish citizens who were sentenced to death by Saudi courts on the charges of apostasy and blasphemy in 2008 after receiving phone calls from Turkish President over the issue.

The textbooks currently used in Saudi schools, including those in Madrid, London and other European cities, are full of hatred toward Christians, Jews, other religions, and even most Muslims, who differ in their interpretation of Islam. The Saudi government school in Madrid teaches that the Protocols of Zion are a matter of fact.

Discrimination toward non-Muslims

In theory, the government protects the right of non-Muslims to worship in private, although that right is not enshrined in Saudi law. In practice, this right is routinely and arbitrarily violated by the religious police intruding in private homes where non-Muslim religious rites may be practiced. The government continues to ban Christian expatriates from celebrating their religious holidays – a term that Saudis extend to social and national holidays such as their respective national days. This ban also extends to millions of Buddhist and Hindu migrant workers. Bibles are not allowed in the country, nor are non-Muslim burials.

Non-Muslims cannot be buried in Saudi Arabia; they must be sent to their home country for burial as they are considered to be "unclean" by the Saudi government. Christian, Jewish and non Muslim prisoners are not allowed to receive religious counseling according to their faith³.

Discrimination toward non-Wahhabi Muslims

Under Saudi law, non-Wahhabi Muslims are also subjected to religious discrimination that is only marginally milder than the one reserved for non-Muslims. For instance, Shia Muslims, who make up around 20% of the people of Saudi Arabia, are labeled "heretics"

³ Saudi Arabia Welcomes Foreigners To Work in Nation -- but Not to Die State's Strict Form of Islam Blocks Burial of 'Infidels' _ *Wall Street Journal*, 9 April 2002

and “Jewish conspirators” by the official religious establishment, and are not allowed to play any political, social or religious role in Saudi Arabia. The Saudi government has consistently excluded Muslim groups that it deems to be heretical or insufficiently Islamic even if they hold Saudi citizenship. Shia are effectively excluded from nearly all high government positions; there are no Shia ministers, diplomats, security officers, army commanders nor heads of government agencies. The Ismaili Muslim Minority in Saudi Arabia number around 700,000 Saudi adherents and live mostly in the southern region of Najran, near the Yemeni borders, and face similarly harsh restrictions, and have not been invited to this interfaith conference, nor to an intra-faith Muslim conference in Mecca. Other important Muslim groups within and outside Saudi Arabia that are being excluded from participation in the conference include Ismaili Muslims from Buhra, Agha Khani, and Salimani persuasions, all of who face frequent persecution in the kingdom.

Representation of the Dialogue

The representation of the conference raises questions as to whether or not Saudi Arabia is making a legitimate effort to create an interfaith dialogue. The conference is overwhelmingly filled with Westerners and Middle Eastern countries. The United Kingdom (population 60 million) is sending 14 delegates, or the exact same number of delegates from Non Arab African and Latin American *combined*. Because of the exclusion of other faiths, the striking geographic disparities, and the overall lack of substance in the agenda, it is apparent that this conference is intended more as a public relations show than anything else. If the Saudi government wanted a legitimate dialogue they would have made more of an effort to ensure that there was a broader diversity of opinion, and not just their allies and the western powers on which they rely for survival. Many of the Muslim groups that are sending delegates are run by and/or funded by the Saudi government, such as the Council on American Islamic Relations (CAIR), and the Islamic Society of North America (ISNA). This indicates that the government is interested mainly in hearing what it already believes.

Agenda of the Dialogue

Many of the world’s problems that this conference purports to address cannot be aided solely by an academic praising of the virtues of the religions represented here, or the virtues of dialogue itself. The conference is divided into four focal themes⁴:

- The first theme is “Dialogue: Its Religious & Civilizational Foundations”. This covers the history of dialogue in the three Abrahamic faiths as well as “Oriental Creeds” (Shintoism, Buddhism, Hinduism, and Confucianism).

⁴ <http://www.world-dialogue.org/english/About%20conf.htm>

- The second is “Dialogue: Its Importance in Human Society”. The items on the agenda include the importance of dialogue in international affairs, its impact on peaceful coexistence, and general advocacy of dialogue as opposed to notions of a “clash of civilizations” or “an end to history”.
- The third is the “The Common Humane Aspects in Dialogue Fields”. This focal point covers the significance of religion and ethics in combating a vast range of problems – ranging from environmental degradation to drug abuse. Terrorism is not specifically mentioned.
- Finally, the conference will consider the “Evaluation & Promotion of Dialogue”. This section of the agenda covers the future efforts and hurdles in promoting dialogue through official religious channels, government groups and NGOs, and the media.

The choice of such an agenda and the exclusion of many pertinent issues facing the world makes the conference simply a symbolic gesture towards true inter-faith harmony. The problems in religious tolerance in the Middle East are not the result of philosophical disagreements between religious authorities. Nor is there a dire need to address the importance and virtues of dialogue itself. If the leadership of this conference was truly sincere and courageous in its desire to at least suggest positive change, the agenda would go beyond these academic questions about which one would be hard pressed to find any substantive disagreement or controversy.

For this conference to have an impact on reality (or at the very least, address it), the agenda needs to go beyond such academic discussions. For instance, the issue of religious freedom in Saudi Arabia could be specifically mentioned, and the Wahhabi clerics could openly put forth their arguments for why their interpretation of Islam should so completely dominate the culture of the country.

A partnership between Muslim and Jewish leaders in issuing a joint, unequivocal call proposal towards ending the violence between Israelis and Arabs could be discussed.