

Saudi Arabia: Interfaith Talks Abroad, Intolerance at Home

by [Simon Henderson \(/experts/simon-henderson\)](#)

Jul 15, 2008

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Simon Henderson \(/experts/simon-henderson\)](#)

Simon Henderson is the Baker fellow and director of the Bernstein Program on Gulf and Energy Policy at The Washington Institute, specializing in energy matters and the conservative Arab states of the Persian Gulf.



Brief Analysis

This week, Saudi Arabia is organizing a global interfaith conference in Madrid, with more than 200 Muslim, Christian, Jewish, Hindu, and Buddhist religious leaders from 54 countries expected to attend. The conference, in the words of its main organizer, the Mecca-based Muslim World League, will "focus on common human values." Many in the West, however, will likely judge the conference as a Saudi public relations effort to emphasize its leadership of the Islamic world, and to ward off criticism, especially from the United States, that Saudi Arabia bears continuing responsibility for political and financial backing of Sunni extremists across the Middle East.

The Saudi Record

Considering the kingdom's infamous religious intolerance, this conference could never happen in Saudi Arabia. Crucifixes and Christian bibles are confiscated from arriving visitors, as is other religious paraphernalia. Non-Muslim religious services have to be held in secret, and their participants are in constant fear of disruption, arrest, or deportation by Saudi religious police. Even Shiite Muslims, a group representing 15-20 percent of the country's population, suffer from repressive policies. In the cautious words of the official Department of State Background Note, "The United States remains concerned about human rights conditions in Saudi Arabia. Principal human rights problems include. . .prohibitions or severe restrictions on the freedoms of. . .religion. . .[and the] systematic discrimination against. . .religious minorities."

In this oppressive context, King Abdullah is an exception. He is tolerant of other religions but is apparently unable to alter the views of more conservative members of the royal family or the kingdom's religious elite. Both of these groups, along with a large portion of Saudi society, adhere to an austere version of Islam known as Wahhabism. And even though Abdullah is considered a liberal, the term is relative; he publicly blamed a 2004 al-Qaeda attack, one that killed six Westerners, as being the work of "Zionists." As commander of the Saudi National Guard, however, Abdullah has allowed foreign military advisors to attend weekly private church services in Riyadh for many years. And during a European tour last year, he welcomed his meeting with Pope Benedict XVI -- the first ever between a Roman Catholic leader and a Saudi monarch -- stating, "If everyone followed the principles of their religions, and that which Allah ordered, the world would be free of clashes."

The conference's invitees include representatives of all Abrahamic faiths and the adherents of Hinduism and Buddhism, but political challenges have led to some compromises. Although no Israelis have received an invitation, Jerusalem-based rabbi David Rosen of the American Jewish Committee, originally from Britain and a former Israel Defense Forces chaplain, is listed as a U.S. participant. After some controversy, the invitation of anti-Zionist rabbi David Weiss -- a prominent attendee of the 2006 Tehran conference that questioned whether the Holocaust actually happened -- was reportedly revoked. Among those invited, but not attending due to scheduling conflicts, are former U.S. vice president Al Gore and Archbishop Rowan Williams, the head of the Church of England. One-time Roman Catholic nun Karen Armstrong, a specialist on Islam, was also invited but a Saudi newspaper described her as a Jewish researcher, underlining the kingdom's conservative view of women in relation to Islam. Moreover, there are no women scheduled to speak at any of the sessions.

Dialogue in the Kingdom, the Umma, and the International Community

The conference, officially called the World Conference on Dialogue, aims to build on a series of "dialogues" held in Saudi Arabia after a number of al-Qaeda attacks in May 2003. Up until then, Riyadh looked at the September 11 attacks with little concern, despite the fact that fifteen of the nineteen hijackers were Saudis. The dialogues provided a forum for Saudi clerics to discuss modern challenges within the context of Wahhabism, thus isolating more extremist views. The dialogues were deliberately held in different parts of the kingdom, and examined issues such as the role of women (though no women took part), education, and labor.

Last month, the process continued when Saudi Arabia hosted an "Islamic Conference on Interfaith Dialogue" in the holy city of Mecca. That conference discussed issues including the need to "confront the culture of hatred between peoples" and "cooperate to end wars, conflicts, and international problems." In a conciliatory gesture toward Shiite Iran -- a country diplomatically at odds with Riyadh -- among those attending was one of the most

prominent Iranian politicians, cleric Akbar Rafsanjani. Public platitudes, however, hide great tensions. Although Saudi cultural mores prevented Wahhabi clerics from criticizing Abdullah directly for organizing the Mecca forum, a group of hardline clerics later issued a statement branding Shiites as infidels. In response, sensing a degree of empowerment from co-religionists in Iran, local Saudi Shiite clerics stated the Sunni authors suffered from psychological problems.

The Madrid conference will tackle issues such as human rights, peaceful coexistence, contemporary moral values, and the role of religion in combating crime, drugs, and corruption. The choice of Spain as a venue was a deliberate move to deflect domestic criticism from Wahhabi clerics. The location recalls the era from the eighth to the thirteenth centuries when Muslims, Christians, and Jews lived together in relative peace under Islamic rule.

Challenges for U.S. Policy

The Madrid meeting is a useful reminder that Riyadh sees its leadership of the Islamic world, along with its standing in the Arab world and its status of the world's largest oil exporter, as an integral part of Saudi foreign policy. The oil-price fueled extravagance of the Mecca and Madrid summits reflects Saudi Arabia's reinvigorated leadership. The kingdom's increased prosperity, however, has also insulated it somewhat from external pressure.

The United States should nevertheless continue to press the kingdom to reform. Abdullah's enthusiasm for interfaith dialogue provides a continuing opportunity for Washington to press for increased tolerance and the curtailment of extremism in the kingdom. The ability of non-Muslims to worship freely, equal rights for Shiite Muslims, and sincere respect for minorities represent some of the areas in which Saudi Arabia must show progress in the wake of Madrid, if its interfaith efforts are to be seen as meaningful. And in an ongoing effort, U.S. officials should continue to identify Saudi Arabia's failure to prevent private charitable donations from going to terrorist organizations as a major shortcoming.

There is, however, a greater concern: the king's support for conciliatory policies may die with him. He is eighty-five years old and his health and mental alertness are persistent concerns. Like the other top princes, Abdullah's most likely successor, Crown Prince Sultan, does not appear to share the king's tolerant approach and may be less willing to risk confrontation with conservative clerics who oppose such policies. Such clerics have increased political leverage at the time of succession because they legitimize the new king through a fatwa (religious ruling) recognizing him as an imam (Muslim leader). Given that Sultan is also old (eighty-four) and reportedly unwell, the lifespan of any progress toward interfaith understanding made in Madrid is far from clear.

Simon Henderson is the Baker fellow and director of the [Gulf and Energy Policy Program \(http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateI02.php?SID=23&newActiveSubNav=Gulf%20and%20Energy%20Policy&activeSubNavLink=templateI02.php%3FSID%3D23&newActiveNav=researchAreas\)](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateI02.php?SID=23&newActiveSubNav=Gulf%20and%20Energy%20Policy&activeSubNavLink=templateI02.php%3FSID%3D23&newActiveNav=researchAreas) at The Washington Institute, specializing in energy matters and the conservative Arab states of the Persian Gulf. Jasmine El-Gamal is a Keston family fellow concentrating on reform efforts in the Arab world. ❖

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