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Saudi Interfaith Summit Faces Challenges

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King's Ambitious Plan, However, Elicits Some Prompt and Vocal Support at Home, Abroad

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RIYADH, Saudi Arabia -- A group of visiting Japanese scholars was making a routine courtesy call recently on [King Abdullah](#) bin Abdul Aziz when the monarch raised a subject that, as he put it, had "obsessed me since two years ago."

Distressed by what he described as disintegrating family ties, a rise in atheism and "an imbalance of reason, ethics and humanity," the king announced plans for a new interfaith dialogue in which "believers of the three main religions -- the Torah, Bible and Koran -- will be of priority."

In other words, Jews, Christians and Muslims.

The proposal made headlines because of [Saudi Arabia's](#) austere, exclusivist version of Sunni Islam, which bans the open practice of all other faiths, and regards even Shiite Muslims as heretics. For the most part, this Wahhabist strain of Islam has rejected interreligious dialogue with non-Muslim "infidels."

Abdullah's stature as "Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques" in [Mecca](#) and [Medina](#), however, gives him some authority in religious matters. So, if as he said, the aim of the dialogue "is to request all religions to sit together with their brothers faithfully and sincerely as we all believe in the same God," something significant has occurred.

The monarch also said that Saudi religious scholars "have agreed" to such a dialogue. "God willing, I will start this matter soon. If we meet and agree," he added, "I will then address the [United Nations](#)."

The king's seemingly ambitious proposal comes at a time of escalating violence and distrust between the Islamic world and the West, with both ensnared in a wide array of grievances, including Muhammad cartoons regarded as blasphemous by Muslims, restrictions on religious freedoms in some Islamic countries and the lack of progress in resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

A desire among some Western religious and political leaders to defuse these precarious relations is apparently one reason why Abdullah's proposal was widely and warmly welcomed, including by the [White House](#).

"When you have someone like the king of Saudi Arabia and all of his stature that is recommending such a dialogue, it can only give us hope that there would be further recognition of everyone's right to . . . freedom of expression and religion," presidential spokeswoman [Dana Perino](#) said. "So we are encouraged by it."

John L. Esposito, founding director of the Prince Alwaleed Bin Talal Center for Muslim-Christian Understanding at [Georgetown University](#), said Abdullah's proposal "is potentially an important and significant move forward in terms of the king sending a signal -- not only to the world but also to the more rejectionist types who are theologically very narrow-minded -- that we're going to open up."

The dialogue proposal -- the location, format and agenda are still unknown -- is popular among Saudis who support the king's reformist agenda of slowly introducing political and social changes. "It's unprecedented . . . [for] Saudi leaders to call for dialogue between the three religions," said Khalil Al Khalil, a member of the quasi-parliamentary [Shura Council](#).

Hard-line religious figures who might not be happy with Abdullah's plans are mute so far, and there have been only mildly worded warnings floated to the king. For example, a young cleric blogging at the Internet forum Al Saha recalled how Muslims who had engaged in past dialogues with Christians had come away disillusioned.

"I advise King Abdullah," wrote Sulaiman Al Khuraishy, that he get his interlocutors to "acknowledge Islam as a holy religion and . . . Muhammed as God's Prophet. If they refuse these, how on Earth can we have a conference with those who don't acknowledge your religion and your Prophet?"

A far greater challenge than internal opposition, perhaps, is whether Abdullah's envisioned dialogue can have meaningful impact, unlike so many past religious conferences. The answer to that question revolves around two dilemmas for the king's advisers: namely, what to put on the agenda and whom to invite.

The king said the purpose of a dialogue would be "to agree on something that would maintain humanity against those who tamper [with] religions, ethics and family systems."

On the one hand, an agenda that addresses such issues as family values, the need for world peace and other already universally agreed upon matters runs the risk of drawing a global yawn. In such a case, the outcome would match the prediction of one Saudi lawyer who called it "a wonderful gimmick [that] . . . will change nothing."

Yet an interfaith dialogue that tackles the most vexing issues in the widening rift between Islam and the West could quickly lead the conversation into an impasse. That is because most of these contentious matters are political ones, ranging from U.S. foreign policy to [France's](#) ban on Islamic head scarves in public schools.

"I don't see where it would be appropriate to get involved in hard-core political issues" in such a dialogue, Esposito said. The challenge for organizers, he added, will be to "develop a program of substance where issues can be discussed both conceptually and practically."

One Saudi official, speaking on background, declined to discuss specifics but said the agenda "will surprise you. It's going to be big."

A second dilemma for the Saudis is who would participate and, specifically, would Israeli Jews be on the roster? In the absence of a conclusive Israeli-Palestinian peace agreement, it is difficult to imagine Israelis being invited to a Saudi-organized interfaith conference, whether it was held in the kingdom or elsewhere.

Jewish reaction to Abdullah's announcement was swift and favorable. [Israel's](#) Chief Rabbi Yona Metzger said in a statement quoted by the [Associated Press](#): "Our hand is outstretched to any peace initiative and any dialogue that is aimed at bringing an end to terror and violence."

[The Jerusalem Post](#) called it "a remarkable development that should be warmly welcomed by the Jewish people." At the same time, the paper said, "it makes as much sense to reach out to Jews and boycott Israel as it would to reach out to Christians and boycott the pope, or to reach out to Muslims and boycott the Saudis, for that matter. The Saudis should understand that Jews are indivisible, since they claim the same for Muslims."

At a recent news conference, the Saudi foreign minister, [Prince Saud al-Faisal](#), deflected a question about Israeli attendance, saying that "it is an interfaith [initiative], which means the three monotheistic religions, so the Jewish faith of course is part of that."

For the moment, said one of Saud's aides, "no one will answer this question."

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