



washingtonpost.com

Jewish-Muslim spat sours Saudi interfaith meeting

Advertisement

By Andrew Hay

Reuters

Friday, July 18, 2008; 5:13 PM

MADRID (Reuters) - A groundbreaking interfaith conference this week ended on a sour note, with a political spat between Muslims and Jews that Saudi organizers wanted to avoid.

Hopes of a follow-up meeting appeared to be scotched.

Saudi Arabia's King Abdullah had gathered followers of the world's major faiths for the Madrid conference to seek religious reconciliation and showcase a more liberal image of his kingdom's austere version of Sunni Islam.

It was the first time Saudi Arabia, where non-Muslims cannot practice their faith openly, had invited Jews to such a meeting and the aim was to skirt hot issues like the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, in order to focus on problems facing humanity.

But televised exchanges between Jewish Rabbis and Muslim participants went too far, according to one Middle Eastern diplomat.

"This was too much, it crossed the line," said the diplomat, who asked not to be named.

Organizers played down a discussion on Zionism between Ezzeddin Ibrahim, an adviser to the president of the United Arab Emirates, and Rabbi Marc Schneir, North American chairman of the World Jewish Congress, which drew media attention.

"UAE Official Attacks Zionism at Saudi Conference," said The New York Sun newspaper.

"People said I attacked Zionism, I did not," Ibrahim told Reuters, adding that no interfaith conference would be complete without Jews.

Schneier also gave a strong defense of Israel in a debate on Thursday, after a Muslim participant referred to Zionists.

GOOD CAUSE, GOOD EFFECT

"The fact there are some discrepancies, some differences between participants, that's normal," said Abdullah Al Turki, Secretary General of the Muslim World League organizers.

But the conference's final statement disappointed many.

"The Madrid declaration does not contemplate holding another conference," said Al Turki. "Whether this conference emphasizes the organization of other conferences, other symposiums in the other parts of the world, remains to be seen."

Rabbi David Rosen of the American Jewish Committee had said earlier the event would be little more than a photo opportunity unless it led to a follow-up in Saudi Arabia with Israeli Jews.

But participants said getting people from so many faiths under one roof had been an achievement in itself, even if there were no Israeli Jews or Palestinian Muslims and Christians.

"There is a desire for this to continue," said Anthony Ball, an aide to the Anglican Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams.

Images on Saudi television of Abdullah meeting Buddhists and Hindus were also unsettling to most Saudi clerics, given their Wahhabi Islam considers believers in such faiths are heathens.

Buddhists saw no problem.

"From a Buddhist point of view, if the motivation is good, then the result will be good, it is cause and effect" said Hongchih Shih, a Buddhist nun from Taiwan.

(Reporting by Andrew Hay; Editing by Douglas Hamilton)

© 2008 Reuters