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Saudis praised for calling interfaith conference

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MADRID, Spain -- Saudi Arabia won praise Friday for taking a leading role in an interfaith conference, with participants saying it was another sign the conservative Muslim kingdom is opening up.

Rabbi David Rosen, the only Israeli who attended the three-day meeting led by Saudi King Abdullah, said he believes the oil-rich Persian Gulf kingdom also wants to reaffirm leadership in the Muslim world for fear of greater instability.

"The Saudis are definitely opening up," said Rosen, who heads inter-religious relations for the American Jewish Committee and is a former chief rabbi of Ireland. "I have heard from the Saudis that this is a culmination of a process that began the moment Abdullah ascended to the throne and that he actually wants to open up Saudi society."

The Saudi monarch unexpectedly called the conference about a month ago. It brought together Jews, Muslims, Christians, Hindus and Buddhists among other religions and was hosted by Spain. The meeting ended on Friday.

Critics said the Saudis were the last people who should be leading a conference on religious dialogue given that Wahhabism _ the austere strain of Sunni Islam practiced in the kingdom _ is considered one of the religion's most conservative. Many believe the conference was held in Spain partly because it would be politically unpalatable for Abdullah to allow Jewish and Christian leaders on Saudi soil.

However, Abdullah has made reaching out to other faiths a hallmark of his rule since taking over the country in 2005. He met with Pope Benedict XVI late last year, the first meeting ever between a pope and a reigning Saudi king.

And in June, Abdullah held a religious conference at home in Mecca, Islam's holiest city. At that meeting, participants pledged improved relations between Islam's two main branches, Sunni and Shiite, and Abdullah also rejected extremism, saying Muslims must present Islam's "good message" to the world.

"It's also believed that he is very concerned about instability in the region obviously in relation to Israel, Palestine, but especially Iraq and even more the ascendancy of Iran and that there is a need to reaffirm what he sees as Saudi Arabia's leadership in the region," said Rosen, who holds dual Israeli-American citizenship.

William Baker, president of the U.S. group Christians and Muslims for Peace, said the real significance of the meeting was that "it originated in the heart of Islam."

"This could not come at a better time for the whole world and peace and it could not have come from a better place as Islam is being propagandized against, lied about and distorted in the West for political purposes," said Baker.

Saudi Arabia presented the conference as a strictly religious initiative. The World Muslim League, which organized it for the king, was adamant there would be no discussions of political issues such as the war in Iraq, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict or Iranian nuclear ambitions.

At the conference, delegates dwelt instead on issues such as dialogue within the Islamic world and with other denominations. Other topics debated were the need to protect the family, the role of women in religion and ways to protect the environment. They agreed to try to organize more conferences and involve the United Nations.

For Rosen, the fact that the conference took place at all was the most significant thing.

"There have been interfaith conferences before, but never by the king of Saudi Arabia," he said. "This is an incredible advancement."

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