

washingtonpost.com

## Saudi King Calls for Interfaith Dialogue

Advertisement

By DONNA ABU-NASR and ABDULLAH SHIHRI

The Associated Press

Tuesday, March 25, 2008; 5:21 PM

RIYADH, [Saudi Arabia](#) -- The Saudi king has made an impassioned plea for dialogue among Muslims, Christians and Jews \_ the first such proposal from a nation with no diplomatic ties to [Israel](#) and a ban on non-Muslim religious services and symbols.

The message from King Abdullah, which was welcomed by Jewish, Christian and Muslim leaders, comes at a time of stalled peace initiatives and escalating tensions in the region.

Muslims have been angered by cartoons published in European papers seen as insulting the Prophet Muhammad and by the pope's baptizing on Easter of a Muslim journalist who had converted to Catholicism.

"The idea is to ask representatives of all monotheistic religions to sit together with their brothers in faith and sincerity to all religions as we all believe in the same God," the king told delegates Monday night at a seminar on "Culture and the Respect of Religions."

The specifics of Abdullah's initiative \_ and who would participate \_ remained unclear, in particular whether Israeli religious leaders would be invited to a Saudi-brokered dialogue. The kingdom and all other Arab nations except [Egypt](#) and Jordan do not have diplomatic relations with Israel and generally shun unofficial contacts.

The call \_ the first of its kind by an Arab leader \_ was significant. The Saudi monarch is the custodian of Islam's two holiest shrines in Mecca and Medina, a position that lends his words special importance and influence. Abdullah said Saudi Arabia's top clerics have given him the green light \_ crucial backing in a society that expects decisions taken by its rulers to adhere to Islam's tenets.

It also raises the possibility that a religious dialogue could have a political impact in the Middle East, easing tensions between Arabs and Israelis in a way that years of off-and-on negotiations and political conferences have failed to do.

The White House welcomed the king's gesture.

"We think increased dialogue is a really good thing," presidential spokeswoman Dana Perino said Tuesday. "And, of course, 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 and freedom of expression and religion. So we are encouraged by it."

Abdullah said he planned to hold conferences to get the opinion of Muslims from other parts of the world, and then meetings with "our brothers" in Christianity and Judaism "so we can agree on something that guarantees the preservation of humanity against those who tamper with ethics, family systems and honesty."

Abdullah, who said he discussed the idea with Pope Benedict XVI when they met at the Vatican in November, framed his appeal in strictly religious and ethical terms, aimed at addressing the weakening of the family, increasing atheism and "a lack of ethics, loyalty, and sincerity for our religions and humanity."

A Saudi official with knowledge of the proposal said it was not intended to have a regional political angle, saying "the initiative is not aimed at the Middle East but at the whole world. It's a global initiative." The official spoke on condition of anonymity because of the sensitivity of the issue.

But Abdullah, considered a reformer in Saudi politics, has in the past proposed peace deals with Israel, saying his country and other Arab nations are willing to recognize the Jewish state as long as it gives up land to Palestinians.

Prominent Saudi cleric, Sheik Muhammad al-Nujaimi, said he saw no reason why any Saudi official, including Abdullah, cannot meet with Jewish religious leaders. "The only condition is for the rabbi not to be supportive of the massacres against the Palestinian people," he said.

In Israel, Chief Rabbi Yona Metzger welcomed Abdullah's call.

"Our hand is outstretched to any peace initiative and any dialogue that is aimed at bringing an end to terror and violence," he said in a statement.

Rabbi David Rosen, head of inter-religious relations at the American Jewish Committee and a former chief rabbi of Ireland, said framing the dialogue in religious terms was key.

"Religion is all too often the problem, so it has to also be the solution, or at least part of the solution and I think that the tragedy of the political initiatives to bring peace has been the failure to include the religious dimension," he said.

Yossi Beilin, a former Israeli peace negotiator, said a Saudi-backed dialogue between Muslims and Jews "could be a balancing factor" against extremists but cannot replace diplomacy.

"Negotiations need to be negotiations and you don't mix religion into a diplomatic conflict, because then there is a danger of turning it into a religious war," he said.

Michael Cromartie, chairman of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, which monitors religious freedom globally and makes policy recommendations, called the proposed dialogue long overdue.

"I don't care who you put in the room \_ the fact they're having the conversation can only help," he said. "It's a courageous thing for the king to do. One should not expect Utopia, but it's a start to have an open and free dialogue in a country with a reputation for religious oppression."

Saudi Arabia follows a severe interpretation of Islam known as Wahhabism, and it was not clear whether Abdullah's call would be followed by steps in the kingdom to relax the ban on non-Muslim worship services, as well as symbols from other religions, such as crosses and Bibles.

Abdullah's contacts with Benedict are also significant.

Benedict angered many Muslims with a 2006 speech in which he cited a medieval text that described some of the teachings of the Prophet Muhammad as "evil and inhuman," particularly the command to spread the faith "by the sword." He later expressed regret that his remarks angered Muslims and stressed that the text didn't reflect his own opinion.

In an audiotape released last week, al-Qaida leader Osama bin Laden accused Benedict of playing a "large and lengthy role" in what he called a "new Crusade" against Islam. Bin Laden also warned of a "severe" reaction for Europe's publication of the Muhammad cartoons.

Muhammad al-Zulfa, a member of the Saudi Consultative Council \_ an appointed body that acts like a parliament \_ said Abdullah's conciliatory remarks were "a message to all extremists: Stop using religion."

Antonios Kireopoulos, head of Interfaith Relations at the National Council of Churches, agreed, noting: "Despite recent years of hostilities, usually by extremists, ... there have been generations of peace between Muslims, Christians and Jews."

"This is a way to reclaim some of that neighborliness," he said.

---

Donna Abu-Nasr reported on this story from Beirut, [Lebanon](#), and Abdullah al-Shihri reported from Riyadh. AP Religion Writer Eric Gorski in Denver and Lily Hindy in New York contributed to this report.

© 2008 The Associated Press

#### Ads by Google

##### [Muslim Dating And Singles](#)

Muslim Marriage And Dating Site. 499,000 Members. Join 100% Free!  
[www.Muslima.com](http://www.Muslima.com)

##### [Come To Mecca.com](#)

Muslim Community Online Join Now Free  
[mecca.com](http://mecca.com)

##### [Muslim Women](#)

Browse Photo's of Muslim Singles. Join For Free. 150,000+ Members.  
[SingleMuslim.com](http://SingleMuslim.com)