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In Qatar, Muslim, Jewish clerics meet

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DOHA, Qatar -- More than a dozen rabbis, including two from Israel, were in attendance this week as this conservative Muslim sheikdom opened one of the Gulf's first scholarly centers dedicated to interfaith dialogue.

The rare meeting of Muslim, Christian and Jewish scholars in the heartland of conservative Islam is another sign of Qatar's efforts to present a moderate image as it bids for the 2016 summer Olympic Games. It's also part of a broader push by Arab governments for interfaith dialogue, even though most still do not recognize Israel.

The talks were not entirely smooth, and politics and disputes over the Palestinian issue did inevitably intrude, said Rabbi David James Lazar, leader of a synagogue in Tel Aviv.

Yet, the benefits for him were huge, he said -- especially the ability to make personal connections with Arabs and Muslims "who otherwise I would have no contact with."

"For some it's their first chance ever to hear, not only an Israeli but to hear a Jewish rabbi speak ... And so one of my responses is trying to tell them the story of the Jewish people, which often they have not heard. The Holocaust," he said.

"I hear their story as well," he said. "It's an exchange of stories."

Another attendee, Rabbi Herschel Gluck, chairman of the Muslim Jewish Forum in Britain, commended Qatar for "being brave" by holding the conference.

"We know that hosting rabbis and an interreligious forum can be controversial in the region," said Gluck, whose group is based in a part of London where Jewish and Muslim communities sit side by side.

Some Qataris did criticize the gathering.

"This openness to other faiths creates confusion among our people and jeopardizes our identity," said one preacher at the local Fanar Islamic center, speaking on condition of anonymity because of the sensitivity of the subject.

But other Qataris consider this and other changes made by Sheik Hamad bin Jassem bin Jabr al Thani as progressive and credit him for social and economic reforms since 1995.

Two months ago, the country also allowed the opening of its first-ever Catholic church. It has had low-level ties with Israel through a trade office for 12 years although it does not recognize Israel, and recently also invited Israeli Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni to speak at a conference on democracy.

Ibrahim al-Nuaimi, the director of the interfaith center sponsored by the ruling family, said the goal is to "promote joint studies of academics from three faiths to foster understanding and peace."

Cardinal Jean-Louis Tauran, who heads Vatican's council for inter-religious dialogue and attended the conference, praised Qatar's efforts to include Jews.

"As religious leaders, let us promote a sound pedagogy of peace, which is taught in the family, mosques, synagogues and churches," Tauran said.

Efforts at interfaith dialogue got one of their biggest boosts when Saudi Arabia's King Abdullah met with Pope Benedict XVI last November at the Vatican.

In March, the Saudi king then 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 moves, however, come amid rising tensions in the region and with peace talks between Israel and the Palestinians stalled. Many also believe there is a growing gap of understanding between the Muslim Arab world and the West.

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 specifics of the Saudi king's initiative _ and who would participate _ still remain unclear, in particular whether Israeli religious leaders would be invited to a Saudi-brokered dialogue.

It also is unclear if the Saudi efforts would have any political component, or any eventual impact on stalled Arab-Israeli and Palestinian peace talks.

Lazar, the Tel Aviv rabbi, said he is no politician but will carry his warm impressions from the conference back to his students and synagogue _ as he hopes Muslim clerics will, too.

Lazar said one Palestinian researcher at the conference confronted him about Israeli textbooks that were, in his words, promoting hatred of Palestinians among Israeli Jewish children.

"My challenge to him was, let us meet together ... and together we'll look at our textbooks, the Jewish textbooks, the Muslim textbooks and the Christian textbooks in Palestine and Israel _ and together we'll find if they're educating children toward hate," he said.

Associated Press writers Pakinam Amer in Cairo, Egypt, and Aron Heller in Jerusalem contributed to this report.

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