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## Skepticism precedes Saudi-led interfaith meeting

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MADRID, Spain -- A Saudi-sponsored conference that will bring together Israeli and American rabbis with clerics from the strict Wahhabi sect of Islam \_ as well as global religious leaders of nearly every persuasion \_ is either a rare opportunity for dialogue or a cynical publicity stunt.

It all depends on whom you ask.

And like any confab that includes Jews, Muslims, Christians, Hindus, Buddhists and representatives of several other religions \_ there is no shortage of opinion.

The conference opening in Madrid on Wednesday is the brainchild of Saudi King Abdullah, who has cast it as a way to ease tensions between Islam, Christianity and Judaism \_ part of an effort to reposition oil-rich Saudi Arabia as a force for moderation in the region.

"To have a dialogue, just to start talking to each other, is an accomplishment in itself," said Saudi Ambassador to Spain Saud Bin Naif Bin Abdulaziz Al-Saud. "At this point in time, the whole world needs to start talking to each other. This is what we hope we can achieve."

Saudi Arabia has presented the conference as a strictly religious initiative \_ not a political one. But it also has political implications, coming from a Mideast heavyweight that does not have diplomatic ties with Israel.

Abdullah has made headlines recently by reaching out to leaders of other faiths. In November, he met with Pope Benedict XVI, the first meeting ever between a pope and a reigning Saudi king.

At a gathering of Muslim scholars, clerics and other figures in the holy city of Mecca in Saudi Arabia in June, Abdullah said that Muslims must turn away from the dangers of extremism and present Islam's "good message" to the world.

His efforts have generally been welcomed in Israel and by the Jewish community, as well as in the Arab world.

"The conference provides a rare opportunity for strengthening mutual respect between the followers of the three main religions," Monsignor Nabil Haddad, head of the Melkite Catholic community in Jordan and a participant at the conference, told The Associated Press.

Still, detractors say the Saudis are the last people who should be hosting a conference on religious tolerance.

Wahhabism \_ the strain of Sunni Islam that is practiced in Saudi Arabia \_ is considered one of the religion's most conservative and Saudi Arabia has sometimes strained ties with Islam's other major branch, Shiism. Only one delegate from predominantly Shiite Iran was invited, and it was not clear whether he would attend.

Observers say the conference is being held in Spain in part because it would be politically unpalatable for Abdullah \_ the titular guardian of Islam's two holiest sites \_ to allow Jewish and Christian leaders into the kingdom itself, a difficult starting point for religious harmony.

One of the conference's biggest names is David Rosen, a prominent Israeli rabbi. The inclusion of an Israeli in a Saudi-sponsored gathering is big news, but Rosen is not listed as being from the Jewish state in the conference literature. He has dual citizenship, and is described as an American.

"Practically speaking, he is being invited as a foreigner and not as an Israeli," Israeli Foreign Ministry spokesman Arye Mekel told AP in dismissing the conference. "If they really wanted to make this significant, they should have invited real Israeli rabbis."

Others in the Jewish state were even harsher.

Mina Fenton, a spokeswoman at Jerusalem City Hall and member of Israel's hawkish National Religious Party, told AP she doubted the Saudis' motives.

"A meeting like this with Saudi Arabia is clearly a political trick," she said. "The Saudis are using it to lie to the West that they are tolerant of others when everybody knows non-Muslims have zero rights in Saudi Arabia."

Others, including Rosen, said the meeting should not be written off.

In an interview with the AP last week, he said that if the conference is a publicity stunt, it will have a limited impact, but that it could also be "the beginning of a process that is in our interest, not just in their interest, in the interest of Israel, the Jewish people and the free world."

Rosen, who serves as head of interfaith relations for the American Jewish Committee, called the Saudi decision to include a rabbi from the Jewish state "a historic step for them."

Spain has no formal role at the conference, other than having agreed to host it. The country has branded itself as a place where the three major religions once all lived together in harmony \_ though with rather notable exceptions like the Crusades to oust Muslims from Europe and the Inquisition in which Jews and Muslims were persecuted and expelled.

In 2006, Spain and Turkey launched a program called the Alliance of Civilizations, which was meant to foster better understanding between the West and Muslim countries.

Spanish King Juan Carlos was expected to address the conference on its opening day, along with Abdullah. Other than the monarchs' opening remarks, the meeting will be closed to the media.

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Associated Press reporters Ian Deitch and Mark Lavie in Jerusalem, Jamal Halaby in Amman, Jordan and Ciaran Giles in Madrid contributed to this report.

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