



A Country Failing its King

By: Raouf Ebeid - Editor

Published: July 22, 2008



Eighty-two year old King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia is attempting to promote a more moderate Islam and to achieve a rapprochement between Islam and other religions. His call for an inter-faith dialogue was realized this past week when the “Muslim World League” assembled a conference of religious scholars for three days of talks in Madrid. A similar conference took place last month in Mekkah, Saudi Arabia, but focused on reconciling intra-faith differences between the various sects of Islam. The purpose of both conferences was to advocate within the Muslim community for a gentler Islam, and to promote its more moderate attributes to the rest of the world.

As “the custodian of the two holy cities”, the King is acting not only the leader of a country, but also as the protector of Islam. The importance of the King’s initiative can only be fully appreciated, however, against the background of the ultra-conservative form of *Salafism*, known as “*Wahhabism*”¹ which is practiced by the majority of his subjects.

Most official newspapers in the Kingdom carried articles on the Madrid conference praising the King’s role in sponsoring the interfaith dialogue and summarizing his opening speech, which called for peaceful co-existence, cooperation and respect among those who espouse different beliefs, the rejection of violence in solving conflicts among religions and an emphasis on shared monotheistic values. However, PI Online found little substantive philosophical discussion coming from the clerics or religious institutions in Saudi Arabia that would contribute in any meaningful way to softening the rigid *Wahhabi* doctrine and its extreme elements, which are in large part responsible for the sanctioning of terrorism as a Jihadi duty.



Despite the King’s message of tolerance and peace, there seems to be little willingness among clerics in the Kingdom to take the necessary steps to turn his aspirations into reality. Yesterday in *Al-Sharq Al-Awsat*, journalist *Ma'mun Fendi* warned that slogans and useless formalities by bureaucratic institutions like the Arab league are not enough. While *Fendi's* warning has merit, his apparent assumption that a religious dialogue instituted and supported by the United Nations, like others have advocated, is an effective way to resolve the clash of civilizations, or any other political problems, is

flawed. There is no evidence that religious discourse, such as the Jewish-Islamic dialogue he suggests, has ever resolved such problems. To the contrary, it is only through the separation of the political process from religious dogma that there is any hope for resolving issues such as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Few writers have been willing to address this dichotomy even though they recognize it as the source of the problem. One exception is the liberal writer *Abdul-Khaliq Hussein* who has clearly articulated the issue and summarized the *intra*-faith steps that must be undertaken in Saudi Arabia before attempting an *inter*-faith dialogue²:

¹ *Wahhabism* is attributed to *Muhammad ibn Abd-al-Wahab*, the 18th century scholar who, together with King Abdel-Aziz Al-Saud, was instrumental in establishing the doctrine in Saudi Arabia.

² Source: <http://www.ahewar.org/debat/show.art.asp?aid=141280>

- *Hussein* calls for a campaign to stimulate a cultural awakening among *Wahabi* clerics, leading to a rational re-interpretation of the religious texts. He points out that there are as many verses in the Quran calling for brotherhood and forgiveness as there are calling for violence and the extermination of non-Muslims. It is imperative in schools and other institutions to expand on the verses calling for compassion and forgiveness and to drop the violent verses from the discourse. These aggressive verses were, *Hussein* argues, the product of the time and no longer apply in the modern world.
- To reduce extremism, he advocates for meetings in the Kingdom between liberal and moderate Islamic thinkers and the *Wahhabi* fanatics. *Hussein* argues that political and religious reform among the population at large is a matter of survival and therefore must take place with or without the consent of the radical clerics.

In a similar vein, commenting on the interfaith dialogue, an Arab analyst said to me that the King can think all he wants; it is the Wahabi religious establishment that still has the last word in Saudi Arabia. As long as these clerics, the rest of the emirs in the House of *Saud* and the majority of the press continue to pay lip service to the King's initiatives while resisting fundamental changes, there is little chance that any of these initiatives can succeed. Muslims do not have to convince the Jews, Catholics and Anglicans that they do not want to kill non-Muslims – the Muslims have to convince each other. That requires renunciation of the *Salafi* ideology of “*Al-Wala' wal Bara'*”, which calls for loving all things that are *Salafis* and hating everything that is not. Proclaiming that kind of open hatred is one of the core problems that lead to violent extremism.

Today, columnist *Hashim Saleh*³ also praised the King's initiative, but raised a red flag. He stated that major Islamic figures like *Al-Qaradawi* and the Muslim Brotherhood cannot continue to support the extremists ideologically while at the same time appearing to distance themselves from them. They must eliminate the inherent contradiction in purporting to be against extremism politically and morally while supporting the underlying ideology. As long as the majority of the population continues to listen to radical clerics rather than their king, however, little will change in the Kingdom. And, until there is change in the Kingdom there is little hope for interfaith harmony.

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Postscript: July 28th, 2008 – Abu Yehya Al-Libi, an Al-Qaeda commander who escaped from prison in 2005 has posted a video on the Web urging Muslims to kill the Saudi King for having sponsored the Madrid Interfaith conference. He called the King a tyrant who has betrayed Islam by equating Islam with other religions.

³ Source: Al-Sharq Al-Awsat – 7/22/2008 – url: <http://www.aawsat.com/leader.asp?section=3&article=479809&issueno=10829>