

Political Islam Online

The King and the Pope – The Word on the Street

The carefully orchestrated visit of the Saudi King Abdullah to Britain, Germany Italy and Turkey was by most accounts meant to obtain assurances of support for the upcoming Annapolis meeting on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. While the King certainly discussed this issue with Pope Benedict XVI, for most Middle East observers it was the fact of the meeting itself that was most significant. There is little doubt that the suspicion which Islam presently generates in the West mirrors the suspicion of Christianity that has permeated the Muslim world since before the Crusades. For many Muslim fundamentalists, this suspicion has evolved into "hate of the unbeliever," encompassing both Christians and Jews. As head of the Catholic Church, the Pope represents a large portion of these unbelievers.

Today, *Turki Al-Hamad* published an article about the visit in *Al-Sharq al-Awsat*¹ stating that "the King did not go as a Saudi monarch or an Arab only....he went portraying the entire Islamic world and as the custodian of the most sacred cities in Islam [referring to Mecca and Medina]." *Al-Hamad* sees the visit as historic, noting that the King represents a country dominated by the conservative *Wahhabi* sect – the country whose name is associated with the birth of terrorism. *Al-Hamad* concludes on a positive note of support, stating: "What *Abdullah* wants to do is to save Abel from the poison of hatred and to save Cain from spilling blood, let us reinstate and share the lost paradise."

In contrast, writing in today's New York Times, Thomas Freedman referred, almost begrudgingly, to the King's visit as "path-breaking." Rather than discuss the significance of the King having taken the first step down that new path, however, he chose to focus almost exclusively on the current lack of religious freedom in Saudi Arabia. Apparently, absent some tangible "deliverable" such as a visa for the pope to visit Saudi Arabia, Mr. Freedman sees the visit as having "left no trace." The reaction on Arab streets, however, suggests that, unlike *Al-Hamad*, Mr. Freedman has failed to see that what may appear to be a very small step can have a significant positive impact.²

PI Online analyzed the reaction on the street by extracting 478 postings on Islamic and Arabic websites during the five-day period immediately following the King's meeting with the Pope (November 6-10) [see charts and appendix]. Through contextual and statistical analysis of postings during this period, we developed a snapshot of reactions to the King's visit. The analysis also gauged the level of interest in this issue among readers during the period examined. The results are as follows:

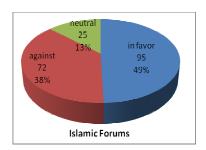
- **LEVEL OF INTEREST**: "Alsaha," one of the most visited Islamic/Arabic websites, posted nine articles on the King's visit and 135 responses. The number of total visits to these articles exceeded 50,000, making it the most popular subject during this five-day period.
- **THOSE IN FAVOR:** While some of the commentary was generated in response to an initial negative comment, the majority of the responses were supportive of the King's visit. The supporters gave *Abdullah* the

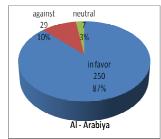
¹ Arabic article source: http://www.asharqalawsat.com/leader.asp?section=3&article=445090&issue=10575

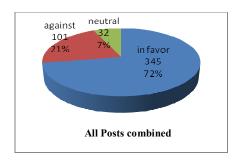
² The well-know newspaper, *Asharqalawsat*, usually carries a full translation of Freedman's editorials. In this instance, however, they chose to redact the first half of Freedman's article, eliminating the sections that were dismissive of the visit and critical of Saudi Arabia. The newspaper may have believed that those portions of the article were too inflammatory and would undermine the generally positive impact of the visit.

benefit of the doubt, trusting in his judgment and portraying him as a man of courage. Some supporters even went so far as to suggest that more religious freedom in the Kingdom would be a good thing. There were many other, more general positive comments such as "it is time to have an exchange among civilizations," or "true Islam is the religion of love and peace" or "both [King and Pope] have shown wisdom and understanding."

- **THOSE OPPOSED**: Only a few responses from those opposed to the King's visit reflected real animosity towards Christians and the West, with comments such as "no dealing with the Christian dog" or "will the King soon wear the Cross?" The majority of those in opposition focused on the controversy that erupted last year when Pope Benedict quoted a passage from a fourteenth century manuscript that was widely interpreted in Islamic circles as insulting the Prophet *Muhammad*. Some even milder criticisms were simply skeptical of the benefits the visit could generate and questioned whether it portrayed weakness on the part of King *Abdullah*, describing the King as "sitting across from the Pope and being lectured like a disciple."
- THE NETWORKS: PI Online examined 230 messages extracted from AlArabiya.net and 11 messages from Al-Jazeera.net. It is worth mentioning that Al-Jazeera carried the story on the day of the visit, posting it late in the evening (22:35), but took it off the front page the next morning, resulting in an usually small number of comments. In contrast, AlArabiya.net had two articles on the visit posted the next day, and also covered the visit on their TV program, "Panorama." Al-Jazeera's virtual silence reflected its more conservative audience and gave the perception that they would prefer to forget that the visit took place.







Given the relatively positive reaction among the Arab populous, the King's initiative can and must be sustained, with clerics and writers like 'Amr Khalid, Qaradawi and Al-'Awdah moving it forward.

We note two positive developments in that respect – one before and one after the visit. First is the Muslim

initiative that culminated in a letter dated October 13, 2007, entitled "A Common Word between Us and You," which was sent by 138 *Sunni* and *Shi'a* scholars to the Pope and leaders of other Christian churches to promote understanding between the Muslim and Christian religions. Second, is *Al-Azhar's* immediate support for the King's initiative and promotion of a dialogue between civilizations. Those Christian religious leaders and writers in the West who advocate harmony and religious tolerance must also take responsibility for keeping alive this bold initiative.

³ "To the Byzantine [Christian] Dog" is a common derogatory term employed by radicals. The expression is attributed to a letter written by a ninth century Caliph, *Al-Mu'tasim* addressing the Byzantine emperor *Theophilos*.

⁴ The quote by the Pontiff, reflecting the views of Byzantine emperor *Manuel II Paleologus*: "Show me just what Muhammad brought that was new and there you will find things only evil and inhuman, such as his command to spread by the sword the faith he preached." The Vatican later released this statement: "The Holy Father did not mean, nor does he mean, to make that opinion his own in any way."

⁵ Two Islamic scholars at *Al-Azhar Sobhi* '*Abd-el-Ra'uf* and *Hamid Al-Faqi* asserted that Islam supports the dialogue for the purpose of establishing peace and security for all societies in all corners of the globe.

The King's Visit to the Vatican

	# of	# of			
Title of the leading (first published) post	Visits	Posts	for	against	neutral
		a religious dialogue			
Forum Al-Saha					
Al-Saha - Will we see the King wearing the cross?	19592	37	17	15	5
Al-Saha - Friendly atmosphere during the King's visit with	200.4	7	,	1	0
the Pope Al-Saha - What Benefit from the King's meeting with the	3994	7	6	- 1	0
Christian Dog?	15269	50	22^{6}	22	6
Al-Saha - Request to the King: Ask the Pope to apologize	2138	2		2	
Al-Saha - The King at the Papal residence	1062	0			
Al-Saha - His highness requested to be advised of the					
public's opinion regarding the King's Papal visit, I	4350	30	12	7	11
<u>obliged!?</u> Al-Saha - I don't blame the King but these rats around him	2127	4	12	4	11_
Al-Saha - The King's visit remind me of King Faysal	1819	2	2	7	_
Al-Saha - The Papal visit: commemorative gifts and friendly	1017	2	_		
atmosphere	908	3	1	2	
Total Al-Saha	51259 ⁷	135	60	53	22
Other Forums					
Islam Online - The Vatican ask the Saudis to allow a larger Re	eligious	41	0.4	1.4	2
<u>Islam Online - The Vatican ask the Saudis to allow a larger Re</u> <u>Expression</u>	eligious	41	24	14	3
Islam Online - The Vatican ask the Saudis to allow a larger Re Expression Islam Online - Royalty follows the scholars to the Vatican?	eligious	4	2	2	3
Islam Online - The Vatican ask the Saudis to allow a larger Re Expression Islam Online - Royalty follows the scholars to the Vatican? Arabs Gate - A bold Move for the King	eligious	4 12	2 9	2 3	
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⁶ Correction in calculating percentages was made due to repeated postings by the same persons –in this site and others ⁷ This number reflects the number of visits to the site, irrespective of multiple visits by same individuals.

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