



## Don't confuse interfaith dialogue with groveling

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Isi Leibler

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A global conference promoting interfaith dialogue sponsored by the current Saudi regime sounds somewhat like South African proponents of apartheid holding a global kumbaya extolling the virtues of racial equality.

That is not to deny that King Abdullah broke new ground by hosting an interfaith conference and for the first time inviting Jews to participate in a Saudi-sponsored event. Rabbi David Rosen, chairman of the International Jewish Committee on Interreligious Consultation, exuberantly described it as "an historic event" and a prelude "to the opening up of Saudi society," although he did caution that "time will tell if this is the beginning or just another event of no consequence."

Regrettably, being hosted by King

Abdullah had such an intoxicating impact on some Jewish participants that they lost their bearings and indulged in excessive praise of their host that degenerated into groveling.

Rabbi Brad Hirschfeld, chairman of the National Center for Learning and Leadership, stressing that he was not naïve, claimed that immediately after he had blessed King Abdullah "with whom God shares divine glory," he saw the king's eyes fill with tears. Rabbi Michael Lerner, head of the radical Tikkun group, suggested that "for those of us who despair about Christianity and Judaism having gone astray... the notion that Islam might be the spark that generates a new religious revival based on mutual respect and spiritual intensity could dramatically expand our understanding of the

endless potential for God to surprise us."

Walter Ruby, from the Foundation for Ethnic Understanding, compared King Abdullah's initiative to Mikhail Gorbachev's perestroika, forgetting that the Soviet reformer initiated dramatic reforms within his country, whereas Saudi Arabia still represents the most extreme example of fanatical Wahhabi style Islamic extremism.

In fact, state sponsored export of Wahhabism has produced a global network of jihadist Islamic schools and institutions which sanctify violence. This has led to the creation of centers throughout the world nurturing terrorist cadres and incubating many of the suicide bombers who are at the forefront of terrorist activities.

Saudi Arabia denies entry to Jews and prohibits all religions other than Islam the right to establish houses of worship. Saudi imams openly promote virulent anti-Semitism, depicting Jews in mosques and on TV as descendents of apes and pigs who should be killed. To this day, the Saudi educational system continues to incorporate obscenely anti-Semitic texts.

Clearly, King Abdullah in his old age did not become transformed overnight into a liberal. But he is astute enough to realize that his country is under great threat from the expanding Iranian dominated Shi'ite crescent and is desperately seeking to bolster the regime's poor standing in the United States and

Europe. That was the prime objective of Abdullah's interfaith conference.

Not surprisingly, the conference took place in Madrid rather than Jedda or Mecca.

Initially, "Rabbi" Yisroel Dovid Weiss, the New York Natorei Karta crackpot who had previously attended the Iranian Holocaust denial conference, was designated to be the only Jew to speak from the podium. After protests supported by an American Muslim imam engaged in interfaith activity, the Saudis backed down and disinvited Weiss. He was substituted by US interfaith guru Rabbi Arthur Schneier, who had hosted Pope Benedict XVI at his Park Avenue synagogue during his recent visit New York.

No Israeli rabbis were invited. Rabbi David Rosen, being Israeli with dual nationality, was designated as an American. In fact, aside from a brief exchange, Israel was kept off the agenda.

More importantly, whereas King Abdullah extolled the virtues of peace and condemned terrorism, participants were informed that only at a subsequent conference would "terrorism" be defined. Hitherto Moslems have denied that attacks against Israel were acts of terror, describing them as legitimate resistance.

It is inexplicable why Jewish participants lacked the courage to raise the crucial issues that would not resonate with their hosts. How

could Jewish leaders participate in such an event without even relating to the obscene, state-sanctioned religious anti-Semitic incitement openly promoted by the country sponsoring the event? How could they remain silent when a Saudi deputy minister of culture stated that "Islam is a moderate culture and we are determined to prevent extremists from hijacking Islam"? Surely they had an obligation to point out that while all three major monotheistic religions incorporate elements of militant piety and violence, Islam, with its dominant jihadist branches, today represents the most violent doctrine. To remain silent on these issues enabled the Saudis to exploit interfaith dialogue as a vehicle to obtain respectability and cover up their extremism.

Jewish representatives also failed to protest when the concluding communiqué of the conference called "for international organizations to work to issue a document stating respect of faiths and religious symbols and criminalizing those insulting them." This seemingly innocuous statement embodies a call to legally sanction Islamic bullying against all who criticize or question Islamic beliefs or behavior as exemplified by the violence and vicious campaign in relation to Danish cartoons of the prophet Muhammad. Jews who are sensitive to the demonization of religious practice must nevertheless strongly oppose this.

Failure to oppose such initiatives parallels liberal American Jewish leaders endorsing Muslim demands

to outlaw security profiling, despite the fact that 95 percent of acts of global terrorism emanate from that group.

We also do ourselves a great disservice if we endorse the false allegation that Islamophobia is rampant. It is in fact a tribute to tolerance in Western countries that despite the violence and intimidation emanating from Muslims, overt aggression or discrimination against them has been extremely limited. Indeed, unlike synagogues, mosques rarely require armed guards, and in Europe, much of the violence directed against Jews actually emanates from Muslims.

We must also demand reciprocity. Tolerance and rights for Muslims in Western countries must be matched by tolerance to non-Muslims in Islamic states.

None of this detracts from our obligation to raise our voices against those who would condemn an entire religion because of the criminal behavior of individuals. Yet it is galling that in the Muslim arena there are virtually no such condemnations in relation to incitement against Israel, Jews, or even the US.

Bottom line: Dialogue with the Catholic Church only succeeded because of openness and a will to proceed by both parties. Reputable Jewish organizations must recognize that dialogue with Muslims becomes counterproductive when they fail to present the Jewish case for fear of offending the other party or demean themselves by groveling to

appease or curry favor with their hosts. All that is achieved is a façade of goodwill which ultimately only strengthens extremists at the expense of the few genuine moderates within the Islamic community.

It was particularly scandalous and

shameful that at a conference presided over by Saudi Arabians who babbled on about tolerance and goodwill, the Jewish participants did not insist on raising the issue of state-sponsored clerical anti-Semitism which is endemic in the country which hosted them.