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## **Religious leaders end Saudi-sponsored interfaith conference calling for U.N. to play role**

The Associated Press  
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**MADRID, Spain:** Representatives of the world's religions on Friday ended a three-day interfaith conference called by King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia which some hope could hail the beginning of a new relationship by denominations.

The Madrid meeting brought together Jews, Muslims, Christians, Hindus, Buddhists and representatives of other religions in what was seen as an unprecedented event for the Saudi monarchy.

In a final declaration, participants urged the United Nations to play a role, saying they hope to follow up "recommendations in enhancing dialogue among the followers of religions, civilizations and cultures through conducting a special U.N. session on dialogue."

Saudi organizers skirted criticism that Israelis and Palestinians were not properly represented, arguing that all faiths had participants.

But the lone participant from Israel, Rabbi David Rosen, was upbeat.

"There have been interfaith conferences before but never by the king of Saudi Arabia," said Rosen, who is head of inter-religious relations at the American Jewish Committee and former chief rabbi of Ireland.

"It's never had the World Muslim League before. It represents the conservative heartland of the most rigid Islamic world view. This is an incredible advancement," he told The Associated Press.

Rosen said he was conveniently listed as an American for the conference owing to his dual nationality, but that he was optimistic that the absence of Israelis and Palestinians indicated the Saudis wanted to at least get the ball rolling on dialogue and that in future conferences they might be invited.

"The Saudis have gone very cautiously by not having the conference first of all in Saudi Arabia and making sure the first conference goes off without any major hitches," said Rosen.

Abdullah Abdul Mohsin Al-Turki, secretary general of the World Muslim League which the Saudi king called on to organize the conference, said although there would be further meetings on interfaith dialogue there were no plans to follow up the Madrid event with one in Saudi Arabia.

Dr. William Baker, president of the U.S. group Christians and Muslims for Peace, concurred that the real significance of the meeting was that "it originated in the heart of Islam."

"This could not come at a better time for the whole world and peace, and it could not have come from a better place as Islam is being propagandized against, lied about and distorted in the West for political purposes," said Baker.

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

The World Muslim League organizers were adamant there would be no discussions of issues such as the war in Iraq, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict or Iranian nuclear ambitions.

Prior to the conference, detractors said the Saudis were the last people who should be hosting a meeting on religious dialogue.

Wahhabism — the strain of Sunni Islam practiced in Saudi Arabia — is considered one of the religion's most conservative.

Many believe the conference was held in Spain partly because it would be politically unpalatable for Abdullah to allow Jewish and Christian leaders on Saudi soil.

But Abdullah has made reaching out to other faiths a hallmark of his rule since taking over the oil-rich kingdom in 2005. He met with Pope Benedict XVI late last year, the first meeting ever between a pope and a reigning Saudi king.

And in June, Abdullah held a religious conference in Mecca in which participants pledged improved relations between Islam's two main branches, Sunni and Shia. At that meeting, Abdullah also rejected extremism, saying that Muslims must present Islam's "good message" to the world.

At the Madrid conference, delegates discussed dialogue within the Islamic world and with other denominations, chiefly Christianity and Judaism. Other topics debated were the need to protect the family, the role of women in religion and ways to protect the environment.

"It is essential for this world dialogue to be open and that its sessions be held periodically," the final conference statement said.

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