
SIGNIFICATION AND IMPLICATIONS FOR INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

Monday, 03 November 2008

King Abdullah's Initiative for Interfaith and Intercultural Dialogue:

Its Significance and Implications for International Relations

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First of all, let me commend His Royal Majesty King Abdullah ibn Abdul Aziz Al Suud's initiative for interfaith and intercultural dialogue. It is such a historical step, coming from the Guardian of Two Holy Mosques of Mecca and Medina, to assemble all of us here, in this place, to engage in a discussion and deliberation on the much needed theme on "interfaith" and "intercultural dialogue." His Royal Majesty's initiative is indeed a concrete manifestation of Saudi Arabia's eagerness and commitment to establish a better and more peaceful world characterised by the celebration of differences, the value of tolerance, and the imperative of international cooperation across culture, religion, and faith.

The fact that Saudi Arabia also represents one of the most important symbols of the Muslim world, a land which gave birth to Islam, a place where the Prophet Muhammad (Peace Be Upon Him), the barrier of this religion, was born, and a destiny where millions and millions of Muslims undertake pilgrimage, there is no doubt that His Royal Majesty's initiative will also be seen as an important undertaking to show to the world that Islam has so much to offer and contribute to the development and enhancement of interfaith and intercultural dialogue.

Under these circumstances, I believe that His Royal Majesty's initiative is

of significant value. For the Muslim world, as His Royal Majesty King Abdullah himself has stated, the initiative would provide a platform for Muslims all over the world "to face the challenges of isolation, ignorance, and narrow horizons, so that the world can absorb the good message of Islam."

In the meantime, for the rest of the international community, His Royal Majesty's initiative should be seen as a major contribution that stands out among other interfaith dialogues that have proliferated since the horrific and dreadful event of September 11, 2001. It is an attempt by a country often called as the heartland of Islam to build a bridge among civilisations and cultures in order to maintain and preserve the universal values of humanity, prevent the clash of

civilisation, and promote greater understanding and cooperation among people of different faiths and cultures.

Many have engaged in a debate whether the so-called "clash of civilizations," as raised to the world's epistemic community by a notable American scholar Samuel P. Huntington, has actually been taking place since the end of the Cold War. His thesis basically poses a question whether conflicts between civilizations would dominate world politics following the fall of the Berlin wall that symbolized the triumph of democracy and capitalism over authoritarianism and communism. If during the Cold War period the spectre of world politics had so much been coloured by conflicting ideologies of democratic-capitalism vis-à-vis authoritarianism-communism, this would change and be transformed by cultures and civilizations in the post-Cold War period.

There is no easy way to assess the extent to which Huntington's thesis does have any truth in the real world. One can always argue that what has been happening in the last fifteen years or so is actually a "celebration" of Huntington's thesis. The fact that "increasingly people defined themselves on the basis of ancestry, language, religion, and customs" has been seen as an undeniable proof that "in the Post-Cold War world, the critical distinctions between people are not primarily ideological or economic: they are cultural." In line to this view, many believe that "world politics is being reconfigured along cultural lines, with new patterns of conflict and cooperation replacing those of the Cold War."

In such a projection, it is unfortunate that Islam has often been put in the limelight of the clashes and conflicts between East and West. The horrible attacks on the World Trade Center in September 2001 and the eventual wars being waged against Afghanistan and Iraq had led many to believe that there seemed to be a deep cultural enmity between "Islam" and "the West." Should this perception persist, it will only provide strong evidence on Huntington's clash of civilizations.

In light of this disheartening situation, where there seems to be irreconcilable differences and enmity between "Islam" and the "West," there lies the significance of His Royal Majesty King Abdullah's initiative. His strong belief and commitment, that all of us should embark on possibly a relentless pursuit of interfaith and intercultural dialogues can function as a bridge to resolve our existing differences.

Indeed, the initiative, which started with the Mecca meeting of Muslim scholars in early June 2008 and culminated in the World Conference on Dialogue in Madrid in July 2008, should and could serve as a cornerstone of the international web of interfaith dialogues, which will contribute significantly to all ongoing initiatives at global, regional, and national levels.

Substantively, the significance of the initiative can also be found in the fact that it is based on the principle of inclusiveness. This is not only an initiative for dialogue among Abrahamic faiths, but also include Hinduism, Buddhism, Shintoism, and other religions. Given such inclusiveness, the significance of King Abdullah's initiative is therefore self-evident. It could help promote global understanding among all religions and cultures of the world of each other.

As I have mentioned earlier, the initiative is also significant due to the fact that it is Saudi Arabia which takes the initiative. In the post-September 11 world, an initiative such as this taken by a country known as the birthplace of Islam clearly demonstrates that Islam is indeed open to dialogue and cooperation with any other religions. With Saudi Arabia at the forefront of this initiative for interfaith and intercultural dialogue, therefore, the legitimacy and credibility of interfaith dialogue will be greatly enhanced.

The initiative would also have great impacts on the value of dialogue within the Muslim world. The call by His Royal Majesty King Abdullah for finding commonality between the Sunni and the Shi'a rather than emphasising the differences, for example, provides an extraordinary opportunity for the Muslim world to engage each other in a more productive way. In other word, His Royal Majesty's initiative serves as a powerful reminder to all Muslims —Sunni or Shi'a—that the value of unity among the ummah should be upheld and enhanced.

This initiative, if it continues and receives the support from other international bodies such as the UN, would have a great impact on the shape of international relations in the years to come. In the post-September 11 world, the international relations has been characterised by mutual suspicions among people of different faiths and cultures, especially between Islam and the Western world. Everywhere, people have been talking about the clash of civilisation. They have been so much imbued by such a thought. And as suggested, all sort of violent acts that have been waging by those who do not believe in the power of dialogue, by those who are unwilling to go an extra mile to resolve our existing differences, only solidify the thought on the clash of civilization. In this regard, I believe that His Royal Majesty's initiative has the potential to prevent the clash of civilisation scenario from happening.

Finally, let me also briefly highlight the significance of His Royal Majesty's initiative with regard to the follow-up meeting conducted in Madrid. The follow-up meeting which took place in Madrid, organised by close cooperation between His Royal Majesty King Abdullah and His Royal Majesty King of Spain, is of a great symbolic value. Spain has a rich history of cultural and religious interchange between Muslims, Jews and Christians from 8th to 15th century. It is a great place for religious and cultural tolerance, which we all need to learn from in order to manage the challenges of today's more turbulent world.

In conclusion, the initiative to embark on a long journey to engage in interfaith and intercultural dialogues is an attempt to strengthen our commitment in building our very own "soft power." We believe that our socio-economic, political, religious, and cultural affairs are not something which should be governed and administered through the so called hard power. This power is only needed as the last resort. Being a civilized and humane community, it is only appropriate if we administer our socio-economic, political, cultural, and religious affairs based on our very own soft power.

It is in this line of consideration that, once again, I commend the initiative of His Royal Majesty King Abdullah.

Thank you all.