

## THE SAUDIS' SHAM

Contributed by Ali al-Ahmed, NY Post  
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Jews, Christians and all other non-Muslims are not allowed to practice their faith in Saudi Arabia

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SEVERAL Middle Eastern and world leaders will meet in New York this week under United Nations auspices to discuss the world state of religious freedom.

The meeting - part of an initiative of Saudi Arabia's King Abdullah bin Abdul Aziz on religious dialogue - is controversial. Abdullah, an authoritarian ruler, leads one of the most (if not the most) religiously oppressive regimes, which has amply earned its nickname "The Kingdom of Hatred."

A recent US State Department report on religious freedom documents appalling trends in Saudi Arabia, which aspires to be the center of a major world religion yet still practices discriminatory policies toward other religions and oppression of other Islamic sects.

Jews, Christians and all other non-Muslims are not allowed to practice their faith inside the kingdom. Their religious texts are banned, confiscated and destroyed. Saudi schoolbooks teach that Christians and Jews are the eternal enemies of Islam. (The textbooks reserve a special place for Jews, who according to these texts must be annihilated because they're responsible for every catastrophe that has befallen Islam and the world.)

Other Middle Eastern countries are hardly better. Although some Arab leaders attempt to present themselves to the international community as supporters of religious tolerance and freedom, their public stance is no more than a public-relations exercise.

The obvious question that the West should be asking these leaders during the conference is: What are they doing in their own countries to stop religious oppression?

Despite their wealth, many Gulf countries remain socially and politically backward. Their leaders keep them that way. The Middle East's authoritarian regimes recognize that the absence of democratic institutions and religious and political freedoms is in many ways key to sustaining their rule and that opening up their countries socially and politically may endanger that.

After 9/11, the Middle East's ruling families found themselves under heavy scrutiny from the Western media, which exposed the dire state of human rights in these countries and demonstrated that most of these countries are still run by

absolute monarchies as family businesses rather than modern nation states.

Although the Gulf governments remain unwilling to introduce changes to their societies that could threaten their dominance, they still had to engineer an image of themselves as benevolent and progressive rulers in response to the questions posed by Western media. Thus, their strategy has been to engage in window dressing for the benefit of Western audiences while maintaining repressive and discriminatory policies at home. This conference is one such effort.

Shi'a Muslims in Saudi Arabia and Bahrain and Christian Copts in Egypt, to name but a few, suffer from political and religious discrimination in their societies. Naturally, countries that practice severe oppression of religious minorities and other dissenters remain breeding grounds for terrorism worldwide. The ideology of religious extremism that represses other groups at home with tacit government support eventually turns outward to find other targets

Against all odds, there is growing public support in Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and other countries for increased political participation as well as human rights and political freedoms. International organizations should direct their efforts to encouraging independent political and human-rights groups working within these countries to bring about change and hold the regimes accountable for failing to integrate religious minorities and ensure their freedom of worship.

Allowing the current public-relations exercise to proceed will send the Middle East governments the wrong message - that religious oppression at home will be tolerated as long as the regimes pay periodic lip service to religious tolerance abroad.

\*Ali al-Ahmed is director of the Institute for Gulf Affairs, a think tank in Washington, DC, focused on the Persian Gulf countries.