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The Saudis' dubious interfaith agenda at the UN

The country's lack of religious freedom betrays its lofty rhetoric. The real aim of its 'dialogue' is to promote a global blasphemy law. By Donald H. Argue and Leonard A. Leo

WASHINGTON—World leaders gathering at the United Nations this week for a special session of the General Assembly to advance interfaith dialogue should have no illusions that their efforts will miraculously promote mutual respect between religious communities or end abuses of religious freedom.

Saudi King Abdullah, who initiated this week's special session, is quietly enlisting the leaders' support for a global law to punish blasphemy – a campaign championed by the 56-member Organization of Islamic Conference that puts the rights of religions ahead of individual liberties.

If the campaign succeeds, states that presume to speak in the name of religion will be able to crush religious freedom not only in their own country, but abroad.

The UN session is designed to endorse a meeting of religious leaders in Spain last summer that was the brainchild of King Abdullah and organized by the Muslim World League. That meeting resulted in a final statement counseling promotion of “respect for religions, their places of worship, and their symbols ... therefore preventing the derision of what people consider sacred.”

The lofty-sounding principle is, in fact, a cleverly coded way of granting religious leaders the right to criminalize speech and activities that they deem to insult religion. Instead of promoting harmony, however, this effort will exacerbate divisions and intensify religious repression.

Such prohibitions have already been used in some countries to restrict discussion of individuals' freedom vis-à-vis the state, to prevent criticism of political figures or parties, to curb dissent from prevailing views and beliefs, and even to incite and to justify violence.

They undermine the standards codified in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the keystone of the United Nations, by granting greater rights to religions than to individuals, including those who choose to hold no faith – or who would seek to convert.

Another stark irony hangs over the UN special session this week. Saudi Arabia is one of the world's worst abusers of religious freedom, a fact recognized by the Bush administration when it named it a “country of particular concern” under the International Religious Freedom Act in 2004. The king couldn't hold such a conference at home, where conservative clerics no doubt would purge the guest list of Jews from Israel, Baha'is, and Ahmadis.

The Saudi government permits the public practice of only one interpretation of Islam. This

forces the 2-to-3 million Christian, Hindu, Buddhist, and other expatriate workers there to leave their convictions at the border, since non-Muslim places of worship are prohibited, non-Muslim religious materials risk confiscation, and even private worship is affected by the strictures.

It also violates the rights of the large communities of Muslims who adhere to Islamic traditions other than the one deemed orthodox by Saudi clerics. In the past two years, dozens of Shiites have been detained for up to 30 days for holding small religious gatherings at home. One Ismaili, Hadi Al-Mutaif, is serving a life sentence after being condemned for apostasy in 1994 for a remark he made as a teenager that was deemed blasphemous. The alleged crime of apostasy, in fact, can be punished by death.

The government's policies are enforced by the Commission to Promote Virtue and Prevent Vice, a roving religious police force, armed with whips, that regularly oversteps its authority and is unchecked by the judiciary.

Women seeking to exercise basic freedoms of speech, movement, association, and equality before the law have experienced particularly severe abuse.

In a particularly egregious recent case, a woman was gang-raped as punishment by seven men who found her alone in a car with a man who was not her relative. She escaped the sentence of 200 lashes and six months in prison only because of a pardon by King Abdullah, yet he also said he believed the sentence was appropriate.

Holding a session on advancing interfaith dialogue abroad is a pale substitute for hosting it in the kingdom, where the message of respect for freedom of religion and belief is most needed.

Against the background of Saudi repression and the kingdom's role in exporting extremism, including through school textbooks preaching hatred of "unbelievers," the UN and every world leader attending the special session should be demanding an end to severe violations of religious freedom in Saudi Arabia.

Dialogue is no substitute for compliance with universal human rights standards.

The monarch would make a far greater contribution by exponentially increasing his efforts to promote religious freedom at home, where religious intolerance reigns. A welcome first step would be to release Hadi Al-Mutaif and all other religious prisoners who remain behind bars in Saudi Arabia.

- Donald H. Argue and Leonard A. Leo are members of the US Commission on International Religious Freedom.