



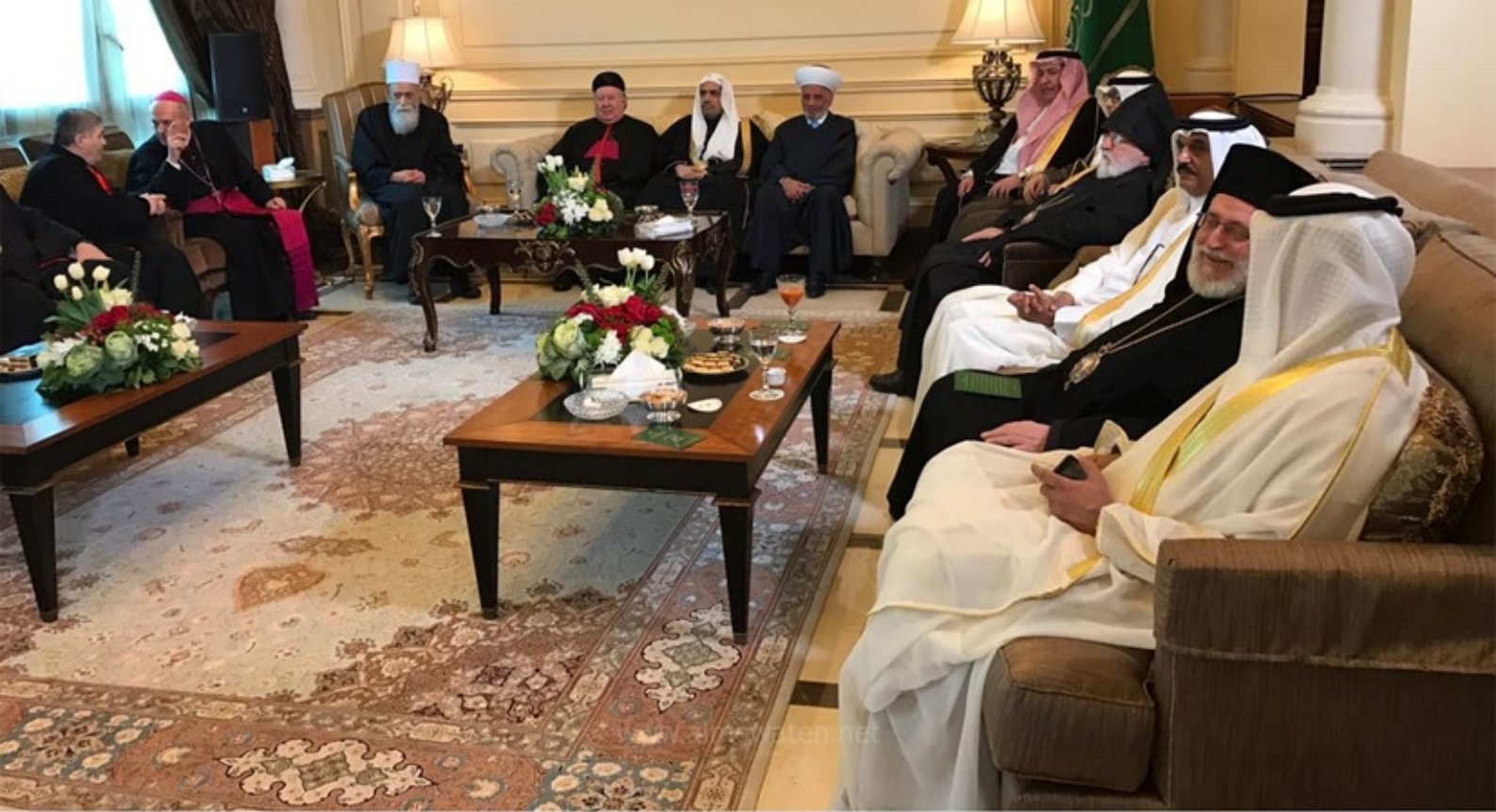
## A Beginning of Openness

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Recently, Saudi Arabia participated in a meeting of Lebanese religious communities in Beirut by having one of the leading scholars in Islamic law, former justice minister and Secretary General of the Muslim World League Dr. Mohammed bin Abdul Karim Al-Elssa represent the Kingdom.

This meeting constitutes the beginning of a great openness toward religious reforms in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia through one of the men of Sharia that is affiliated with the Council of Senior Scholars, as well as the official religious establishment of Saudi Arabia.





Dr. Al-Eissa welcomed the representatives of the different Lebanese sects along with the Vatican delegate in this spiritually focused meeting, where the values of respect, tolerance and openness toward other religions and sects were emphasized. Since this is the first meeting of its kind in which one of the major authoritative figures that is affiliated with the Saudi religious establishment was in attendance, the subject matter of the meeting was primarily spiritual in nature.

There were others in the Saudi religious establishment, however, that would not attend such gatherings unless they would act as debaters and opposers that would argue against other religious denominations. As such, they have remained reluctant to host or even meet with any differing religious body unless the dialogue was adversarial in nature. In contrast, the recent religious gathering that took place in Beirut was in strident support of Lebanese coexistence and cooperation, as well as of the convergence of their 24 different sects that is based on love, peace and their primacy over all individual interests. They also stood against the imposition of political or religious opinions of one upon another in the name of religion.

In fact, Dr. Al-Eissa stressed that Islam warned against the forceful imposition of views, and that Islam has coexisted peacefully with other religions in the past. Furthermore, by virtue of the Quran, Islam permits the marriage of Christian and Jewish women. This has set the tone of the religious dialogue to that of politeness and respect for the other side's humanity and dignity. However, respect, appreciation, coexistence, cooperation, and tolerance should always be the building blocks upon which any religious discussion arises, with or without dialogue. Dr. Al-Eissa cited the Prophet of Islam as an example of respect for others, as the Prophet set up a funeral for a non-Muslim woman, asserting that every deceased person deserves to be respected even if they are not Muslim. If the dead were afforded this level of respect, then the living should no doubt be afforded an even higher level of respect.

Dr. Al-Eissa stressed that the absence of this required level of Islamic awareness has led some Muslims to delve into the realm of extremism, which in turn results in the manifestation and development of reckless and confrontational acts of harm to come to the forefront.



## An Enlightened Approach

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Dr. Al-Eissa also delivered a speech at the gathering, where he said that followers of varying religions and sects should know that the inherent nature of the universe requires us to believe in the truth and the reality of difference, diversity and pluralism. He also mentioned that all religious communities should deal with each other using the logic of priorities and the logic of tolerance, as the logic of priorities transcends any narrow or limited interest in order to achieve a broader and higher interest. In addition, the logic of tolerance brings us closer together for the sake of our coexistence and cooperation, which are the building blocks of achieving civil and international peace. These propositions reflect a new logic that is open to others, all of which are coming from one of the most important symbols of the Saudi religious establishment. It is being talked about openly perhaps for the first time from an international point of view from the Muslim World League, and from an internal Saudi point of view from a member of the Council of Senior Scholars.

Religious fundamentalists in Saudi Arabia have fought against this enlightened approach that has been proven to be the true Islam through Dr. Al-Eissa's speeches, lectures and writings. His extremist detractors have met him with accusations of westernization in order to use religion as a means of emotional manipulation, sectioning of Islamic texts from other Islamic texts, and making grave errors in the interpretation of these sectioned texts.



## The First of His Kind

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Dr. Al-Eissa is considered to be one of the most distinguished Saudi scholars in cultural, civilizational and religious cooperation, as he has established a relationship with many research centers, delivered lectures in many European, American and Asian universities, and met with politicians, parliamentarians, academics and jurists. In his conversations, he has been both outspoken and honest in his delivery, where he admits any mistake he has made. All things considered, Dr. Al-Eissa is the first Saudi religious scholar to employ this cooperative and candid tone of discourse that is delivered in such an unprecedentedly open manner, that it is not accepted by some conservatives.

Dr. Al-Eissa currently assumes the top position at the world's leading Islamic institution that represents all Muslim communities away from the political influence of other countries, since the Islamic organization that receives international political influence is the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), which has the membership of all Muslim countries. When it comes to its official decisions, the OIC holds less sway and influence than the Muslim World League. This is because the OIC is an official international body, while the Muslim World League is considered to be more popular and more accessible to Muslim communities worldwide.



# A Future of Openness

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In Saudi Arabia, there are many scholarly minds that are more open-minded as a result of having a correct understanding of Islam, by virtue of their understanding and their reading. However, they still lack the depth and strength of Islamic intellectual discourse, the same strength and command of language and conversation that Dr. Mohammed Al-Eissa exemplifies.

Combined with his position and stature, one can argue that his open and welcoming method of delivery currently makes him the most important figure of his kind, even though he is merely a religious personality that also happens to be a scholar of Islamic law and jurisprudence

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