

Monthly Highlights

December 2011

International Interreligious Affairs

Vienna, December 11-13,

Meeting of the Executive Committee of the KAICIID

The official signing of the King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz International Center for Interreligious and Intercultural Dialogue took place in October this year and was signed by the foreign ministers of Saudi Arabia, Austria and Spain, supported by Cardinal Jean Luis Tauran of the Vatican at a ceremony that was attended by Austrian leaders, official and representatives of the local religious communities.

However the signing requires ratification by the respective parliaments. In Austria this is likely to happen next month. But due to the recent elections in Spain and the establishment of a new government, it may now take as much as six months before Spanish ratification will be forthcoming. As that will probably be just before the summer, the Muslim month of Ramadan, and the month of Jewish festivals, the official opening of the Center will probably only take place next November.

It will be recalled that this center is the result of the initiative of King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia following first from his declaration in 2008 that the Muslim world had an obligation to engage other world religions and cultures to advance shared values in addressing the global challenges of our times.

Obviously there is also an external relations aspect to the initiative. However King Abdullah also sees this initiative as a means of bringing about greater interreligious pluralism and tolerance in Saudi Arabia itself (in keeping with his establishment of a national institute for dialogue in Saudi Arabia itself and the engagement of the national ministry of education to this end) as reconfirmed in the recent statement of Saudi Foreign Minister Saud El Faisal (reported in Al Arabiya).

Following a pan-Islamic conference in Mecca to support this initiative, the King convened the first ever Muslim sponsored international gathering of leaders and representatives from the world's major religions together with King Juan Carlos of Spain at the latter's palace in Madrid.

In November 2008, he brought his initiative to the United Nations General Assembly under the rubric "culture of peace". President Peres was among the world leaders invited to and attending this event.

King Abdullah then decided to establish a permanent international center in Vienna in cooperation with the government of Austria that was eager to partner in the initiative and a property has been procured to serve as the international center procured to serve as the international center.



Despite various issues that caused delays in the process leading to the establishment of the center, work proceeded on the text of the agreement or charter (that was signed in October) under the acting leadership of the Saudi deputy Minister of Education and Director of the King Fahd Center for Dialogue, Faisal Al Mouammar, together with a working committee. This committee was subsequently appointed as the executive committee in accordance with the charter that requires such to consist of three Christians, three Muslims, one Jew, one Hindu and one Buddhist. (The charter also calls for a world advisory board to reflect the world religious geography and demography and include those religions not represented on the executive.)

Accordingly the executive committee is made up of the representatives of the Vatican, the Archbishop of Canterbury and the Ecumenical Orthodox Patriarch. The Muslims include Dr. Mohammed Samaak of Lebanon Dr. Hamad El Majid of Saudi Arabia, with the Shia representative still to be confirmed. The Hindu is Swami Agnivesh, the Buddhist is Khandra Rinpoche (the only woman in the group) and I am the Jewish representative.

Our first semi-official meeting took place on December 11-13 at the Sacher hotel in Vienna, at which we began work in earnest on the actual modus operandi of the center and to determine the scope and nature of its activities.

In all probability there will be another three such working meetings of the executive before the center is officially launched.

