

**International Interreligious Affairs, January 2011 - monthly highlights**  
**David Rosen**

**Rome, January 12-16.**

In mid-January I was in Rome for meetings with Curia leadership and also hosted a session on Jewish-Catholic and Israel-Vatican relations in the wake of the Special Synod on the Middle East.

In fact the dates of my visit had been determined by the planned meeting of a delegation of religious figures from the different official religious communities of Israel (joined together in the Israel Council of Religious leaders formed four years ago) with Pope Benedict XVI. However this event did not take place as scheduled due to the staff strike at the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs responsible both for issuing the tickets locally and for facilitating the group in Rome. Nevertheless I went ahead with my own itinerary of meetings with high ranking Vatican officials.

I was accompanied by AJC's liaison to the Holy See (and Rome representative) Lisa Palmieri Billig who had set up my program. This included meetings at the Secretariat of State, the Pontifical Commission for Religious Relations with Jewry, the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, and the Congregation for the Eastern Churches, as well as meetings with Jewish community leaders in Rome. We also hosted a special dinner and dialog session that included a number of prominent church leaders (including Cardinals Jean Louis Tauran and Peter Turkson) and both the Israeli Ambassador and the US Ambassador to the Holy See, which reviewed inter alia, the proceedings and outcome of the special Synod on the future of the Christian communities in the Middle East that had taken place last November and which I had addressed, as detailed in my November report.

**Vienna, January 16-18**

From Rome I went on to Vienna to attend the meeting of the Board-in-formation of the planned King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia's International Centre for Interreligious Dialogue. As I have reported in the past, the proposal to establish this centre is the outcome of the Saudi King's interfaith initiative three years ago. This meeting was convened to finalize and endorse the charter and modus operandi of the Center.

In addition to the representatives of the Vatican, the Ecumenical Orthodox Patriarchate and the Archbishop of Canterbury, the other members of the Board-in-formation present were the internationally respected Muslim scholar Dr. Mohammad Sammak of Lebanon and myself as the sole Jewish representative; together with the centre's acting director, Faisal Al Mouammer (who is also the Deputy Minister of Education in Saudi Arabia and responsible for the Centre for Dialogue in Riyadh.) The Board will officially be constituted when the Buddhist, Hindu and Shia representatives have been formally invited and accepted to serve on it.

Aside from our own meeting to formulate the structure, objectives, underlying values and modus operandi of the center; meetings were held with the Austrian authorities including the primate of the Catholic Church in Austria, Cardinal Christopher Schonborn, who hosted us graciously and was very enthusiastic about the Center.

An impressive property in the city center of Vienna is being purchased and will probably take about half a year to refurbish. Thereafter an official opening is planned to take place by the Austrian government together with King Abdullah and the Board.