

## Monthly Highlights

June 2012

### *International Interreligious Affairs*

#### June 4-9 Istanbul

##### World Economic Forum summit, June 4-7

The World Economic Forum invited me to participate and speak at their summit on new developments in the Middle East, Africa and Eurasia, that was held in Istanbul. (see:- <http://www.weforum.org/events/world-economic-forum-middle-east-north-africa-and-eurasia-2012> )

I had been asked to arrive before the opening of the summit for a meeting of “faith leaders” attending the summit, which included Chief Rabbi Haleva of Turkey, Sheikh Yusef Al Khoei of the Al Khoei Foundation, Khaled Amr of Egypt, and Father Nabil Haddad of Jordan. The main purpose of this meeting was to provide input regarding participation of religious leaders in the Davos Annual Meeting and the Global Agenda Councils of the WEF.

On the second day of the summit I was one of the presenters at a session entitled “Identity in Transition”, together with Professor Moncou Cheikh-Rohou ( a member of the new Tunisian Parliament) , Professor David Rodin of Oxford, Professor Timur Kuran of Duke University; and Ido Sharir of the Peres Peace Center.

The session was introduced and facilitated by Professor Daniel Shapiro, Founder and Director of the Harvard Law School International Negotiation Program.



##### Turkish Jewish community, June 8/9

The Turkish Jewish community invited me to hold meetings with their religious and communal leadership over the weekend, when I also addressed the congregation at the Ortakoy synagogue.

#### June 10-13, Vienna



The next meeting of the Leadership and Board of Directors of the King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz International Center for Interreligious and Intercultural Dialogue (KAICIID) took place at the Sacher hotel. The main focus of the deliberations was on preparations for the launching of the Center in late November.

I also held meeting with the Israeli Ambassador in Vienna Aviv Shiron, Chief Rabbi Paul Eisenberg, and

addressed the Executive of the Austrian Jewish community, apprising them of developments concerning the KAICIID .

In addition, the acting leadership and members of the Board of Directors of the KAICIID held a formal meeting with leadership of all the religious denominations in Vienna and also dined with members of the press in preparation for the launch.

The Austrian newspaper Der Standard published an interview with me regarding the center – a translation of which is to be found below.

### **June 24-25, Boston**

The Boston Archdiocese's Redemptoris Mater Seminary honored me at its gala dinner on June 24<sup>th</sup> and Cardinal Sean O'Malley gave the laudatio. Among those present were Rob Leikind Director of Boston's AJC office and Martin Kaplan, former chairman of the AJC's



Interreligious Affairs Commission. AJC was appropriately acknowledged by both the Cardinal Rector of the the Boston interviewing



and Father Tony Medeiros the Seminary. In advance of the event Jewish Advocate carried an article me and Father Medeiros

(see:-

<https://www.dropbox.com/s/75dkvl9z6g0izbr/The%20Jewish%20Advocate%20article%203.jpeg>)

The text of my presentation at the gala dinner may be heard at :-

<http://www.pilotcatholicnews.com/PhotoGalleries/20120628RabbiRosen/index.html>

and an article about the event was published by the Boston Pilot ,

<http://www.thebostonpilot.com/article2.asp?ID=14847>

see also Cardinal Sean's blog (<http://www.bostoncatholic.org/Cardinals-Corner/Blog/Cardinal-Sean-Blog.aspx> - three quarters of the way down.)

The following day I serviced the AJC's Boston office , The day culminated in the third program of a series that the AJC Boston office has been holding together with interreligious partners under the rubric "Pluralism, Peace, Prayer: The Struggle for the Soul of the New Middle East."



This particular program (the last of three) focused on the situation and challenges faced by religious minorities in the State of Israel. My co-presenter and interlocutor was Father Dr. George Khoury, currently

resident in California, but former head of the Greek Catholic Church's tribunal in Israel and senior Melkite minister in Nazareth as well as a practicing psychologist.

The event was reported in the Boston Jewish Advocate:-

[http://www.thejewishadvocate.com/news/2012-06-29/Local News/A rabbi and priest each take aim at religion in Is.html](http://www.thejewishadvocate.com/news/2012-06-29/Local%20News/A%20rabbi%20and%20priest%20each%20take%20aim%20at%20religion%20in%20Is.html)



---

**Interview with Der Standard, Vienna, Austria , Wednesday June 13 2012**

**Rabbi David Rosen on founding the Saudi Center in Vienna: “Jews have to take risks“**

.German original: [HTTP://DERSTANDARD.AT/1317019916376/INTERRELIGIOESES-INSTITUT-SAUDI-ZENTRUM-IN-WIEN-WIR-JUDEN-MUESSEN-RISIKEN-EINGEHEN](http://derstandard.at/1317019916376/interreligioeses-institut-saudi-zentrum-in-wien-wir-juden-muessen-risiken-eingehen)

**Interview by Maria Sterkl, June 13, 2012**

Rabbi David Rosen is the only Jewish representative on the Board of the controversial institute being established for interreligious dialogue in Vienna. We asked him why he agreed to take on this difficult job.

The decision to make Vienna the location of the King Abdullah Bin Abdulaziz International Centre, which will be financed by Saudi Arabia, has created a lot of commotion; many people think that you cannot name a center for interreligious dialogue after the king of a country that treats religious freedom with contempt. Foreign Minister Spindelegger’s solemn act of signing the founding treaty on Thursday will probably create further protests. We interviewed Rabbi David Rosen, who will be the institute’s only Jewish board member, asking him why he would put himself in that difficult position.

**derStandard.at:** Rabbi, you are the only member on the board of the interreligious center who is officially not allowed to travel to Saudi Arabia simply because you are Jewish. Why are you still willing to be on the Board of Directors?

**Rabbi David Rosen:** I actually know quite a few Jews who have traveled to Saudi Arabia, and I think that I will be able to as well. However the Saudis can precisely use this opportunity to show that they have serious intentions not only of improving interreligious relationships but also religious freedom in their country.

**derStandard.at:** Was it a tough decision for you whether or not to join the Board of Directors as the only Jewish board member?

**Rabbi David Rosen:** No. I was already present at the first interreligious meeting with King Abdullah in Madrid, and I was impressed by his plans to improve Saudi Arabia’s behavior towards other faiths in his country as well as to engage religions globally. This has been a very slow process, but I still consider it vital to support it. I believe that it is in the interest of all the different faiths and especially the Jewish community, to support this process.

**derStandard.at:** When did the idea of founding this institute emerge?

**Rabbi David Rosen:** The initiative of the King began with a Pan-Muslim convocation in Mecca to get world Muslim support for this initiative to promote dialogue and cooperation between the world's religions on the burning issues of our world today and especially to make religion the force for good that it should be . Having received that overwhelming support, King Abdullah decided to hold the first interreligious meeting in Madrid . He evidently concluded that it was too early to hold such a meeting in Saudi Arabia because its society would not yet be ready for this kind of dialogue, but that such an event , as indeed the initiative as a whole, would start to have a growing impact on changing attitudes in Saudi Arabia. Together with King Juan Carlos and the Spanish government , we were welcomed by both kings at the Juan Carlos' palace in Madrid, though King Abdullah was clearly the main host. Back then, I do not think that the concrete idea of founding a permanent center had yet emerged. King Abdullah then took his initiative to the UN for global support and subsequently the decision was made to found the center in Vienna.

**derStandard.at:** What were the Saudis' intentions in founding this center?

**Rabbi David Rosen:** While there is no doubt a public relations aspect to this as well as a Saudi reaffirmation of its Muslim leadership, I believe that there is a genuine interest to advance change within Saudi Arabia and to give its citizens a more global view of the world. In terms of relationships, to be honest I believe that the primary focus was and is more on the Christian churches and especially the Catholic Church, rather than on us Jews, let alone on the religions of the East . Indeed it is clear that King Abdullah's meeting with Pope Benedict XVI had a significant impact on this process. To be consistent though, they had to include a Jewish representative as well. They ended up choosing me even though that was probably not an easy choice for the Saudis given that I am an Israeli. I know that they have been criticized for choosing me.

**derStandard.at:** Why didn't the Saudis just choose a US-American Jewish representative then to spare them the criticism?

**Rabbi David Rosen:** They could have done that, too. I apologize for the immodesty, but I think there were a lot of people whom they trusted who recommended me and then they had already had some experience of me and concluded that I could be more of an asset than a liability, not least of all because I do represent the oldest Jewish American human relations organization and so they can, as it were, cover a number of bases through me. In the end, they evidently concluded that the positive aspects outweighed their fear of criticism. But there may be strategic reasons, too; after all, now they can basically say, "Look, this is a legitimate and respectable project; even though we don't like the country Rabbi Rosen is from, we still chose him. That's proof that we have an honest interest in improving our relationship."

**derStandard.at:** Have you experienced criticism within the Jewish community, too?

**Rabbi David Rosen:** Yes, of course. As early as four years ago when the first meeting in Madrid took place, some tried to convince my employers not to let me attend the meeting. I even had newspapers

against me for it. The critics said that I was just a fig leaf for the Saudis, and that I was collaborating with the enemy. I can understand this kind of criticism and do not think it is entirely silly, but I consider it to be short-sighted. You are only harming yourself if you refuse to work with somebody who is going in the right direction, even if your collaboration will include some problems. This initiative is a great opportunity and if it does not live up to expectations or causes me any discomfort, I can always exit. When more and more information about the plan was released and it became clear that key Islamic figures as well as the most important world Christian bodies would collaborate on this project, my decision was clear.

**derStandard.at:** When did you choose Vienna as the center's location and why?

**Rabbi David Rosen:** The King's decision to found the center's headquarters in Vienna was made about two years ago. I would be interested to know why they didn't decide on Madrid; after all, that was where the whole process started. Maybe because Vienna is more centrally located and there are a number of international organizations located there. I am not sure.

**derStandard.at:** Some Austrians are speculating that economic interests were the reason why Austria offered to found the center on its soil.

**Rabbi David Rosen:** That may be plausible. But the question remains why King Abdullah chose Vienna, considering that he already had excellent connections to King Juan Carlos and the Spanish government. Perhaps the Austrian government showed more interest and support.

**derStandard.at:** Does it bother you that the interim director of the center is a Saudi-Arabian government representative?

**Rabbi David Rosen:** Would that have been a permanent diktat without the Board having the final say, it would have been worrying. However the founding document signed by the founding governments of Saudi Arabia, Austria and Spain, affirms that the institute will be entirely independent and that it will be the board's responsibility to guide and direct the center. Should the Saudis backtrack on this provision in the charter, I imagine that most of us on the Board would terminate our collaboration.

**derStandard.at:** Nevertheless, the center will be financed by the Saudi Arabian government.

**Rabbi David Rosen:** Yes, the institute's building belongs to the Saudis and the center has been named after King Abdullah. However, that is something we are all in favor of, also the Christian representatives and myself, simply because it is definitely a positive development for Saudi Arabia to stand up for religious tolerance and dialogue. And yes, there are many problematic aspects to be found in Saudi Arabia, perhaps particularly for Jews. But it was stated that the institute would precisely help to change intolerant and even anti-Jewish sentiment in Saudi society. Now it is up to us to risk acting in good faith. We have to consider one thing in particular: in the Muslim world, Saudi Arabia is not just any Islamic state, but the state that contains the two holiest Muslim shrines. Saudi Arabia is the bedrock state of

Islam, so to speak. So if that state shows commitment to the process of religious freedom, we would be stupid not to encourage that development.

**derStandard.at:** How many members will be on the board?

**Rabbi David Rosen:** Three Muslims – two Sunnis, one Shiite – three Christians – representing the Pope, the Archbishop of Canterbury and the Orthodox Ecumenical Patriarch, one Buddhist, one Hindu, and one Jew. While the official founding parties are the governments of Saudi Arabia, Austria and Spain, whose Ministers of Foreign Affairs signed the official agreement to establish the center, the Vatican represented by Cardinal Tauran also attended the signing and assumed a special founding observer status.

I should also mention that there will be an Advisory Council of some eighty people from around the world , especially representing the faiths and regions of the world not represented on the Board .

**derStandard.at:** What are the goals you will try to achieve on behalf of the Jewish community?

**Rabbi David Rosen:** For the Jewish community it is of crucial importance to reduce biases and prejudices. We are the eternal minority and will always be a minority. Therefore, interreligious understanding is absolutely vital for our wellbeing. However the center hopes to be a hub – and information center and clearing house - for all interfaith activity across the globe. It also hope to address major social, ethical, and educational challenges of our time through specific task forces and to contribute to conflict resolution especially where religion is intertwined with conflict.

**derStandard.at:** How often will you travel to Vienna?

**Rabbi David Rosen:** I imagine two or three times a year.

**derStandard.at:** Will women’s rights be one of the topics you will address?

**Rabbi David Rosen:** I very much hope so. We have discussed this and I haven’t seen any negative reactions. At least one woman will be on the board – the representative of the Buddhist community. Of course there are striking differences in opinion on this. But I think you could not be a credible institution of interreligious dialogue if you ignored women’s rights in particular and human rights in general.

*Rabbi David Rosen is the American Jewish Committee’s International Director of Interreligious Affairs. He is a former Chief Rabbi from Ireland and also serves as interreligious advisor to the Israeli Chief Rabbinate. He is to serve on the board of the Saudi-financed interreligious center in Vienna as the only Jewish representative. He lives in Jerusalem.*

[Print Article](#) | [Email Article](#) | [Share Article](#)

Copyright © 2002–20012, Austrian Press & Information Service. All rights reserved.