



## Monthly Highlights

### January-February 2020

#### *International Interreligious Affairs*

Two of the most remarkable experiences of my career in interreligious relations took place during the months of January and February, both relating to Saudi Arabia. These are mentioned below, but beforehand, on

**January 14/15 in Rome**, I was one of some twenty four religious leaders - eight Jews, eight Christians and eight Muslims – gathered under the auspices of Ambassador Sam Brownback, the US Ambassador for Religious Freedom in conjunction with the US State Department and the US Embassy to the Holy See. The meeting was convened by Rabbi David Saperstein, Pastor Bob Roberts, and Imam Mohammed Majid. The purpose of this gathering was to brainstorm regarding ways in which religious leaders and representatives may be engaged to advance the principles of religious freedom and to combat the violent abuse of religion. The participants were hosted by Ambassador Callista Gingrich at an opening reception at the US Embassy, and the gathering concluded with a private meeting and discussion with Pope Francis on ways to promote his declaration on human fraternity.





[https://baytarrahmah.org/2020\\_01\\_16\\_abrahamic-faiths-initiative/](https://baytarrahmah.org/2020_01_16_abrahamic-faiths-initiative/)

**January 22-26, in Poland** , I participated in AJC's groundbreaking mission taking the Secretary General of the Mecca based Muslim World League, Dr. Mohammed Abdulkareem Al Issa (former Saudi Minister of Justice) and a delegation of major Muslim leaders from half a dozen Arab countries and also from European countries, to Auschwitz on the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the camp's liberation.

Being the Jewish member of the multireligious Board of Directors of the King Abdullah International Center for Interfaith and Intercultural Dialogue (KAICIID, established in 2012 by Saudi Arabia together with Austria and Spain and with the Holy See, in 2012 as an intergovernmental center based in Vienna) has provided me with the opportunity to engage Muslim leaders from the Arab world, especially Saudi Arabia, most of whom I would not have been able to meet otherwise; and it was through KAICIID that I had the opportunity to get to know Dr. Al Issa some years ago and develop a genuine friendship with him.

Last year AJC hosted Dr. Al Issa at an event prior to a conference on Responsible Leadership in which I participated that Dr. Al Issa co-convoked with Mr. Bawa Jain (SG of the World Council of Religious Leaders) at the UN. At the AJC event, Al Issa and David Harris signed an MoU committing to joint initiatives the first of these to be the visit to Auschwitz on the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of its liberation.

The import and impact of this homage exceeded expectations. The encounter for these Muslim leaders with the horrors of the Shoah not only had a profound personal effect on them that was evident to all of us present, but also led to profound expression of their solidarity with the Jewish community in the face of the pain and horror of this tragedy, both in the speeches, the memorials, and the Muslim midday prayers conducted at the site.

From Auschwitz we travelled to Warsaw, and the program began the next day with a visit to the Polin museum, witnessing to the rich history as well as the tragedy of Polish Jewish history.

Many of us in the AJC delegation subsequently participated in midday Friday prayers at the Warsaw mosque, and thereafter the Muslim and Jewish delegations gathered at the main synagogue in Warsaw for a special service at which speakers included Dr. Al Issa, myself and Rabbi Michael Schudrich the Chief Rabbi of Poland. Al Issa's condemnation of Holocaust denial as an extension of the guilt of the horrendous crimes themselves was especially powerful. He also called on all Muslims around the world to acknowledge the enormity of the crimes of the Shoah and also for Muslim-Jewish fraternity and collaboration to prevent violence and hate, and to promote the wellbeing of society at large.

That evening, I was honored to lead an AJC Shabbat dinner that was attended not only by the delegations but also by political civic and religious leaders from across Polish society.

This in a little more than a day, we went from tribute to the enormity of Jewish suffering, to mutual religious respect, to religious celebration - serving as a testimony to the potential and importance of Jewish-Muslim mutual respect and collaboration.



Here are some of the extensive media links:

<https://www.ipost.com/Diaspora/Antisemitism/Interfaith-prayers-led-at-Auschwitz-by-most-senior-Muslim-to-visit-to-date-615128>

<https://www.ynet.co.il/articles/0,7340,L-5665186,00.html>

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZDNm\\_1KNOYY&feature=youtu.be](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZDNm_1KNOYY&feature=youtu.be)

<https://www.facebook.com/265381087276035/posts/791567197990752/>

<https://www.kan.org.il/item/?itemId=65590> (from minute 45-50)

<https://youtu.be/93HbT10b-fc>

<https://albalad.co/wawancara/2020A9511/the-visit-was-important-for-relations-between-islam-and-judaism/>

<https://www.ajc.org/news/lasting-impact-of-muslim-jewish-visit-to-auschwitz>

### **February 18-20, Riyadh Saudi Arabia**

[Less than a month later I was in the Saudi Arabian capital together with the other members of the Board of Governors of KAICIID.](#)

Our Board meetings had taken place mostly in Vienna where the Center is located, but also in Madrid and Rome. However, no meeting had ever previously taken place in Saudi Arabia and indeed never before had a multi-faith delegation ever been officially invited to the Kingdom.

So just holding our Board meeting in Riyadh was momentous in and of itself. But to my pleasant surprise, I discovered after arriving in Riyadh, that we had even been invited to the royal palace to be received by King Salman, Custodian of the two Holy Mosques of Islam. That was another first – a multi-religious delegation in the palace, and I the first rabbi to be received in the kingdom by a Saudi monarch.

The palace is an impressive gleaming white complex from without, and inside a grand opulent sequence of corridors and reception rooms as well as offices. We were received by two guards of honor, all in traditional Arab dress, one with traditional daggers, the other with traditional swords, as we were ushered into the King's reception room where the Minister of Foreign Affairs Prince Faisal was also present. We were seated according to an already determined protocol and the King addressed us (in Arabic followed by an English translation), thanking us for our work on behalf of KAICIID and emphasizing the importance of Interreligious collaboration.

"Today" he said, "it is not possible let alone desirable to be in isolation of one another. The challenges for humanity are vast – social, scientific and so on; and it is our religious duty to know one another and to collaborate with one another for the good of society at large."

He also had an arguable take on Islam in Saudi Arabia. "True Islam is tolerant, enlightened and embracing" he declared, and added "and this is the way we were before political factors led to us to become more extreme and insular. Today we are reasserting the authentic historical enlightened and tolerant Islam that respects all religions and peoples."

He was referring above all to Saudi reactions to the Islamic revolution in Iran as well as radicalization elsewhere. However, whether one accepts this historical revisionism or not, this is clearly the direction in the which the King is seeking to take his country. The notorious modesty patrols have disappeared, women's education is advancing exponentially and women in public roles are more and more and more evident. During our visit, we were taken to visit the historic site of Old Dir'ayah, Riyadh's ancient predecessor as the first capital of Saudi Arabia which has been restored as a beautiful tourist location and museum. The majority of guides and instructors at the site were women, albeit very well covered up.

Following the audience with King Salman, we were hosted by the Secretary General of KAICIID, Faisal Bin Muammaar, at his exquisitely beautiful home, to which many leading Saudi scholars and



intellectuals had also been invited. One of the most prominent of these declared our meeting with the King as “absolutely unprecedented and historic, and of great significance for Saudi Arabia.”

But perhaps the most reflective moment for us of the spirit of change in Saudi Arabia today, was the meeting we had with some seventy or so men and women, graduates of the third cohort of a program called Salam, for the promotion of intercultural communication and understanding. These were men and women in their twenties, many of them professionals, mostly university graduates (very many of whom had studied abroad), and all of them impressively fluent in English.

We were, of course, hosted in something of a VIP bubble and therefore would not have been likely anyway to have encountered anyone who would have seen our visit in a negative light. However, we were still all pleasantly surprised by the warmth of our reception. The gentleman who greeted me on the plane was not unique. While sitting in the lounge of our hotel waiting for our transport, Saudis came up to us to thank us for our visit.

We discovered a sense of excitement among the Saudis we encountered at the changes that are taking place in their country and our visit was seen by many of them as confirmation of this change.

Nevertheless, there is obviously a long way ahead for Saudi Arabia before it can be considered an open society, and there are many aspects that remain problematic in terms of human rights and freedoms.

It behooves us not to ignore abuses, to call these out, and to do our best to encourage the necessary changes in these areas as well. In this regard I was of course particularly concerned with the fact that Saudi textbooks, even if they were not quite as egregious as in the past, still contained very problematic references to Jews, as well as Christian and others, and also include a very negative portrayal of Israel. But I felt that as my interlocutors saw me in a respectful and constructive light, there was much more willingness to listen to criticism. I was told that further changes are in progress and I was encouraged to be in ongoing communication with those responsible for this subject.





Here are links to some of the coverage:

<https://www.timesofisrael.com/in-first-saudi-king-hosts-israeli-rabbi-at-royal-palace/>

<https://jewishnews.timesofisrael.com/saudi-king-hosts-top-british-rabbi-at-landmark-interfaith-summit/>

<https://www.jweekly.com/2020/02/25/first-rabbi-to-meet-saudi-monarch-full-of-optimism-on-trip-to-s-f/>

<https://omny.fm/shows/english-news-highlights/saudi-king-hosts-israeli-rabbi-for-first-time>

[pic.twitter.com/BNVPCM8Pfe](https://pic.twitter.com/BNVPCM8Pfe)

### **Additional media**

There was media interest in AJC's position In anticipation of the opening of the Vatican Secret Archives over the period of the pontificate of Pius XII and the Second World War. See

<https://www.newsweek.com/archive-pius-xii-nazi-germany-1488632>

<https://apnews.com/75688893fac47b6a78ccbf9399805f8a>