

## Abrahamic cooperation in MENA countries

Zoom-Conference on 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> of November 2020

### Minutes

#### 18<sup>th</sup> November 2020

The conference began with welcoming words of Dr. Jürgen Micksch, Prof. Dr. Karl-Josef Kuschel, Ambassador Dr. Volker Berresheim, Prof. Dr. Ralf Rothenbusch and Dr. Mohamed Bechari on behalf of the The World Muslim Communities Council. Abdassamad El Yazidi organized the digital event and let the program.

Jürgen Micksch thanked „The World Muslim Communities Council“ in Abu Dhabi for their support and for providing the zoom platform with the possibility for translations into English and Arabic and the German Federal Ministry of Foreign Affairs for the financial help. He also stated that the German NGO „Bread for the World“ financed Abrahamic encounters in Egypt in the year 2020.



Prof. Dr. Karl-Josef Kuschel, chairman of the Abrahamic Forum in Germany, emphasized that in our days a spiritual base is utterly necessary for a fruitful international interfaith cooperation. Abraham as the common father is not a label but an obligation to show respect for each other. He also referred to the Abraham Accords, joint statements from August and September 2020 between Israel, the United Arab Emirates and Bahrein. The agreement with the UAE was officially titled the *Abraham Accords Peace Agreement*.

Dr. Volker Berresheim, Ambassador of the German Federal Ministry of Foreign Affairs, introduced his Division „Religion and Foreign Policy“ as a new project that was created only two years. He remarked that in times when instruments of politics are falling short people feel that religions are important.

Dr. Mohamed Bechari, chairman of The World Muslim Communities Council, remarked that a good and lasting relationship between Germany and the MENA countries including the UAE is more important than ever, especially during the COVID 19 pandemic. Since the virus started to spread social injustice is more evident and conspiracy theories and misinterpretation of religious texts have risen. This digital encounter aims to show the importance that Abrahamic faith is based on dignity, peace and humanism.

Prof. Dr. Ralf Rothenbusch mentioned that the Catholic Academy of Mainz, was originally intended to host the conference. He expressed also a warm greeting on behalf of the Auxiliary Bishop of Mainz Dr. Udo Bentz.

After a mutual introduction of the 40 participants, Jürgen Micksch gave a short report about the „Abrahamic Forum in Germany“ that is now existing for nearly 20 years. The initiative started when an increase of resentments against Jews and Muslims in general was happening. To set an example of the importance of religious dialogue the Abrahamic Forum was founded by representatives of Jewish, Christian and Muslim belief.

Abrahamic teams were established shortly afterwards to boost the religious dialogue in schools and in institutions of higher education. A series of inter-religious journals were also published.

In 2014 the Abrahamic Forum was contacted by the Federal Ministry for Environment, Nature and Nuclear Safety for establishing the project „Religions for Biological Diversity“. Including nine religious communities a joint declaration was published in 2015. Since then more than 1.700 mosques have opened their Friday prayers to projects of biological diversity and combating racism.

Finally, the MENA-Project got underway in 2015 with its first Abrahamic-teams in Egypt and Israel. It has since then spread to other countries.

Stephanie Krauch gave a short background report on the work of Abrahamic teams in Germany. Abrahamic encounters have become an important addition of school education in elementary schools and High schools. They support teachers in their efforts to handle religious questions in classes that became increasingly diverse in the last years. Encounters with Abrahamic teams take place in a relaxed and authentic atmosphere. They inform about differences as well as the common ground in religious text and in practice. With their practical attitude towards handling religious matters they offer an emotional and sensual experience for children, teenagers and adults. Those include events like inter-religious ceremonies, workshops to prevent religious conflicts as well as discussion and visits of sacred buildings and how they are used in everyday life.

Johanna Hessemer introduced the project „Religions for Biological Diversity“. As the diversity of species becomes more and more endangered because of climate change, people of all beliefs are becoming increasingly concerned. 80 % of the world's population belongs to a religious community which emphasizes the preservation of God's creation. That is a strong base to come together and to learn from each other.

Dr. Volker Berresheim and Dr. Silke Lechner introduced the taskforce „Religions and peace“ within the Federal Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Meanwhile they cooperate with 90 countries worldwide. The achievements are especially apparent in the annual world assembly for „Religions and Peace“ in the German City of Lindau on the Lake Constance in Southern Germany. The interfaith conference is sponsored by the Federal Foreign Office. Its key aspect for this year's conference was laid upon the subject of women, faith and diplomacy. About 1.200 faith leaders joined the conference in the last year. There is also a mediator training organized with the news channel „Deutsche Welle“ and a networking program with German churches. Dr. Volker Berresheim emphasized the cooperation with other agencies such as the transatlantic policy network on Religion and diplomacy. Recently even an Abrahamic team has been established at the Federal Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Berlin.

After a break the cooperation partners of the MENA-Countries presented their work in the afternoon session:

## Egypt

Dr. Tharwat Kades - as the chairman of the International Academy of Dialogue in Egypt - organizes events with two Abrahamic Teams since 2016. They inform schools and community centers in the country. The inter-religious encounters started some years ago with private schools in Cairo and the Nile Delta. In the beginning the training was centered on school principals, religion-teachers and other school staff. Later on social workers as well as the parents were introduced to inter-religious subjects like „Importance of Co-Existence, value system and tolerance“. About two years ago the attention shifted to work with pupils from public schools. Since then, more than 50 events have been organized and ten more will follow until the end of 2020.



important answer.

Refaat Fathy remarked that Abrahamic Teams plan to work with university students who study to become a teacher. It is also necessary to focus more on technologies like social media channels to tackle hate speech messages in Egypt. Posts and videos of Abrahamic Teams could be an

The Abrahamic Work is restricted mainly to members of the churches in Egypt, Muslim representatives and few Bahais. In Christian schools however Muslims are in the majority. As there are hardly any Jewish partners in Egypt, Nava Hefetz, Rabbi in Israel, offers a cooperation via a zoom channel.

Further questions occurred considering future plans to attract new members to the Abrahamic Teams. A strategy could be to contact PhD and master students to join.

## Israel

Rabbi Nava Hefetz introduced the work of the NGO Rabbis for Human Rights (RHR) in Israel. Besides spiritual work, like reading the book of Genesis weekly inside different institutions of the society there are many achievements: In the West Bank Palestinian farmers are being helped to get access to their land and their harvest. RHR is also involved in the discussion about legacy of land regulations in the Knesset.

An enormous step forward was to get access to the pre-military academies where 30.000 young Israelis are being trained every year. These young people get an important access to inter-religious dialogue. Many of them meet representatives of other religions for the first time in their life. About 70% of the military students will stay in the military and become officers later on. Their education and democratization play an important role on the way to a peaceful society.

Important developments in 2020 included:

- A zoom conference during Ramadan with 200 participants
- A zoom conference with people in Gaza sponsored by France for social projects in this critical area with a total of 7 Million Euro

- Participation on the Olive harvest with six leaders of faith from Galilee and Jerusalem. After picking olives an interfaith dialogue with different prayers was held.

8 retreats are planned for 2021. They ought to bring faith leaders together with youngsters.

Rabbi Ehud Bandel proposed to promote much more educative work of RHR via channels like zoom and to concentrate even more on the conflict with Palestine. Many Palestinians feel left behind because they have become more victimized during the corona crisis.

## **Morocco**

Various meetings, e.g. an international conference at the Mohammed V University, have been organized this year. New Curricula for interreligious studies within the Bachelor and Master programs have been proposed.

David Toledano, President of the Jewish community in Rabat, gives a review of Jewish history in Morocco. Today about 3.000 Jews are living there. He emphasizes that minorities like the Amazigh or Berber, whose native tongues had been forbidden for a long time, are now equated by law.

## **19<sup>th</sup> November 2020**

The day started with a presentation by Prof. Dr. Ralf Rothenbusch about the figure Abraham and his significance for Jews, Christians and Muslims. Rothenbusch remarked that he discusses the subject from a catholic point of view and underlined that images of Abraham differ very much from another. While in Jewish belief the act of obedience is central, Christians concentrate on the direct line from the Genesis to the New Testament and the Redeemer Jesus Christ. In the Quran Abraham (Ibrahim) is named as friend of God and the motive of hospitality becomes central in the Abraham story. The presentation can be downloaded:

<https://abrahamisches-forum.de/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/Rothenbusch-Significans-of-Abraham.pdf>

## **Tunisia**

Dr. Mongia Nefzi and Thamer Mahfoudhi gave a presentation on interreligious projects in Tunisia. An international conference on „Interfaith Dialogue and Pluralism between Abrahamic Faiths“ in Hammamet was carried out in June 2019. Achievements in 2019 had been the implementation of field-work projects targeting young people affiliated with the three Abrahamic religions, including a visit of the holy place of Jewish pilgrims in Djerba and a field trip to a church and a synagogue in Tunisia. Due to the COVID 19 lockdown these projects had to be postponed.

Planned future activities in Tunisia were introduced and discussed: e.g. a conference in May 2021 between Muslims and Jews as well as carrying out environmental activities like cleaning beaches, mosques, churches and synagogues by young people from Christian, Jewish and Islamic faiths in 2020-2021.

## **United Arab Emirates**

Dr. Yussef Hamitou explained the role of „The Forum of Promoting Peace in Muslim Societies“ and its exchange program which exists in the United Arab Emirates. It is based on the principles of dialogue by the German scientist Hans Küng. The audience was very interested in the exchange program and the perception of the organization in the public.

## **Constitution of an “Abraham Forum in MENA-Countries” accepted**

In the afternoon the proposed constitution of an “Abraham Forum in MENA-Countries“ was thoroughly discussed. It was highly expressed that in the executive board of the new founded „Abraham Forum in MENA-Countries“ members of different countries, genders and faith should be presented equally. The remarks on the constitution were adopted. Finally the constitution was accepted and all participants from MENA-Countries were asked to join the new founded „Abraham Forum in MENA-Countries“. A version in English and Arabic of the constitution will be provided.

<https://abrahamisches-forum.de/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/Abraham-Forum-Constitution-19-11-20.pdf>

The next digital conference will be carried out on **16th of June 2021**.

With a big applause of all participants the conference ended in mutual consent.

Stephanie Krauch, Darmstadt 30.11.2020