

KAICIID closure puts Austrian neutrality into question, is ineffective and harms dialogue

Activist and former KAICIID partner takes on the Austrian parliament's decision to close the interreligious center in Vienna

Vienna – June 18, 2019

Author, educator and activist, Heather Wokusch is one of many people who oppose the closing of the so-called "Saudi Centre". In her opinion piece for *Metropole*, Wokusch gives insight into the activities of the center, raises questions regarding the selective application of human rights principles and warns against exploiting anti-Arab sentiment for political purposes.

“The decision to close the KAICIID Dialogue Centre, an interfaith organization dedicated to conflict resolution, sets a dangerous precedent.”

She goes on to elaborate on the need for consistent action in regards to denouncing human rights violations and use of the death penalty.

“If the protection of human rights applies globally, can it be assumed that Austrian-based entities from the US, China, Japan, Iran and Singapore will now also be closed? After all, those are among the countries which carried out controversial executions in 2018.”

The author speaks highly of the work of KAICIID and sees a lack of effort by parliamentarians to understand the work of the organization.

“Workshops on integrating into Austrian society, events for capacity building in peaceful dialogue, support in understanding interfaith principles? KAICIID’s got them – free of charge.”

Wokusch suggests other measures that would be more effective in forcing Saudi reform.

“Perhaps freezing the Austrian-based assets of wealthy Saudis or demanding concrete support from large Vienna-based entities such as OPEC would be effective instead.”

On social media, the many people who oppose the closing have used the hashtag [#standwithkaiciid](https://twitter.com/standwithkaiciid).

For the full article visit: www.metropole.at

Heather Wokusch is an author, educator and activist. She has written numerous political articles and two activism books that reached Amazon’s top 10 in their category. A firm believer in the democratization of knowledge, she is an expert in eLearning and provides consultation on topics connected to organizational development, media outreach, digitalization, intercultural communication, and innovative learning architectures.

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GUEST COMMENTARY: Closing KAICIID, Silencing Dialogue

Author and activist Heather Wokusch, who has partnered with KAICIID takes on the Austrian Parliament's decision to close the interreligious center in Vienna

By Heather Wokusch
Vienna, June 17, 2019

18-year-old Murtaja Qureiris has reportedly escaped the death penalty in Saudi Arabia, largely due to public outcry stemming from global media coverage.

But even with this breakthrough, the mission is not accomplished. Qureiris is but one of many youth facing a death sentence, one of millions across the world in precarious situations and requiring ongoing support.

The Austrian Parliament's resolution to use all diplomatic means necessary to protect the teen is admirable. However, the related decision to close the KAICIID Dialogue Centre, an interfaith organization dedicated to conflict resolution, sets a dangerous precedent.

Getting to the heart of the facts

It is unclear how many of the political leaders who voted to shut down the KAICIID Dialogue Centre have actually visited its office, met its staff, or experienced its work firsthand.

I have.

As a founder of the [SDG 5 Thrive!](#) initiative, I have organized numerous projects empowering women of a refugee background; we have performed a theater piece for former UN SG Ban Ki-moon and former Austrian President Heinz Fischer, given speeches, and met thousands of people in our outreach activities.

And when we have encountered someone needing support, the Dialogue Centre's young, multinational team has consistently been ready to help. Workshops on integrating into Austrian society, events for capacity building in peaceful dialogue, support in understanding interfaith principles? KAICIID's got it – free of charge.

It is worth noting that [of KAICIID's roughly 60 employees](#), half are women and 20 are Austrian. Just three are from Saudi Arabia with the remainder coming from 27 other countries and representing a variety of faiths.

Yet even with its relatively small staff, [the Centre's work reaches across the globe](#), from countering hate speech in Nigeria to supporting local peace-building initiatives protecting the Rohingya in Myanmar. And that explains the global outpouring of support for KAICIID Dialogue Centre in light of its impending closure.

In this context, it is important to ask: Why close an office that is successfully supporting vulnerable populations in Austria and abroad? And who will take responsibility for all of those services if the KAICIID Dialogue Centre is shut down?

Making political points

In this pre-election period, it is tempting to exploit simmering anti-Arab sentiment for political gain.

Avoiding that trap presents challenges moving forward. For example, if the protection of human rights applies globally, can it be assumed that Austrian-based entities from the US, China, Japan, Iran and Singapore will now also be closed? After all, those are among the [countries which carried out controversial executions in 2018](#).

In essence, shutting down Austrian-based organizations with ties to nations supporting capital punishment is one thing; selective application of that principle is another.

If hardball tactics are required moving forward, perhaps freezing the Austrian-based assets of wealthy Saudis or demanding concrete support from large Vienna-based entities such as OPEC would be effective instead.

The importance of dialogue

The political situation in Saudi Arabia is clearly of grave concern on multiple levels, and serious action must be taken to promote human rights. The relationship between Vienna and Riyadh is complicated...

But within that fluid context, closing an established organization focused on social cohesion and dialogue makes no sense.

The Austrian Parliament's resolution to use all diplomatic means necessary to protect the life of Qureiris is admirable.

And diplomacy on an ongoing basis requires dialogue. That is exactly why KAICIID exists.

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