I recently had the opportunity to briefly tour Doha, Qatar, to meet with the Managing Director of the newly established Doha International Institute for Family Studies & Development. He is Professor Richard Wilkins, my good friend from Brigham Young University in Provo, Utah where he had been the initiator of a similar program some years ago. The newly established Institute owes its doctrinal and visionary foundations to the ideas of Her Highness Sheikha Mozah bint Nasser Al-Missnad, Consort of His Highness the Emir of Qatar.

This institution is an independent center for higher learning and facilitating the disseminations of current laws and discussions on the study of the Family. Its genesis is the decision of Her Highness to follow up concretely on her announcement at the Conclusion of the last Session of the Doha International Family Conference of 30 November 2004. In that important meeting Her Highness had declared her intention to set up and create such an institution.

That such pious and timely aspirations have actually borne fruits so expeditiously, is a living tribute to her clear determination to create an intellectual atmosphere of understanding and propagating the fundamental human values in following the historical acceptance of family as basic tenet of civilizations in major human rights texts that emanated with the creation of the UN Charter, such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The leading text of this nature is to be found in Article 16 (3) thereof which assets in categorical terms:

“The Family is the natural and fundamental group unit of society and is entitled to protection by the society and the State.”

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Despite this philosophical message derived essentially from the teachings of great faiths and the monotheistic religions, Family as an institution has stood threatened in this century from the strong efforts of anti-family advocates in the 20th century. Dr. Allan Carlson observes with acute perception when he says: “Foes have mounted attacks on all aspects of the natural Family, from the bond of marriage to the birth of the children to true democracy of free homes” (See Dr. Allan Carlson, The Natural Family Manifesto, 2005, page 5). This campaign was advocated on a very wide basis internationally with the result it had global adherents by 1990s. The UN declared 1994 as the year of the family but cynically, the opponents too embarked upon their own advocacy of divergent views. Internationally the problem has serious ramifications in the Western world which has led to vigorous efforts to thwart this danger from pro-family protagonists.

Then the UN was persuaded to observe 2004 as the 10th Anniversary of the International Year of the Family. This anniversary observance was announced by the UN General Assembly decision number 164/75 given on 18th December, 2002. This year produced a tremendous amount of scholarship and erudite work by pro-family intellectuals, non-governmental bodies and religiously based institutions. Prominent international events of 2004 that can be cited for this pro-family momentum are the Mexico World Congress of Families III, the Kuala Lumpur Family International Conference and the Doha International Conference to which some detailed reference may be helpful.

The credit to have hosted the leading intellectual event of this decade year in the form of the Doha International Conference on Family goes to the State of Qatar. Let me therefore applaud the State of Qatar, the worthy Emir of Qatar, His Highness Sheikh Hamad Bin Khalifa Al-Thanni, for showing such firm commitment to this fundamental postulate of all humanity. The specific gratitude that should be noted is all due to dynamic leadership of Her Highness, Sheikha Mouza bint Nasser Al-Misnad, who is also the President of the Supreme Council of Family Affairs in this country. She graciously decided to lend her auspicious supervision to hold this landmark international conference to celebrate the decade of the adoption of the year of the Family in Doha. Her guidance was the driving force in organizing that conference; since then she has been the main architect of the implementation of the ideas of the Doha Declaration of 2004. The creation of this Institute is therefore an important first step toward realizing the goals set out in the Doha mandate.

As I believe I am among the first international visitors to this new Institute, a word about what I saw in Doha regarding the working and operations of this institution of tremendous significance would be in order. The Doha Family Institute is an independent body sponsored by The Qatar Foundation which works directly under the supervision of Her Highness with a distinguished Board of Governors. By its creation the goals of the Doha process have to be achieved. It will work in coordination with Qatar’s Supreme Council for Family Affairs, The Ministry of Foreign
Affairs and where appropriate with the other academic institutions within the Education City of Qatar.

I may add that during my recent visit the Doha Family Institute kindly took me to tour this Education City. It is simply awesome in its operational capacity and facilities. Both as a student and a professor I have had the opportunity and privilege of being at the best academic institutions in the world such as Oxford, Cambridge, Columbia, and Harvard; I can say therefore on the basis of personal experience how well, comparatively speaking, the Education City, a basic foundation of intellectual endeavors in Qatar should be perceived. Qatar’s Education City has all the requisite amenities to facilitate students’ and faculties’ production of outstanding scholarship.

Among the Objectives of the Institute are:

1. To cooperate with the Qatari institutions mentioned above, e.g., The Supreme Council of Family Affairs, to achieve the ideals of the Doha Declaration.
2. Networking with systems for accomplishing the goals set out above with efficiency and produce erudite academic work.
3. To work for organizing international conferences relating to Family.
4. To bring together prominent government leaders and scholars to discuss Family Research.
5. To encourage international network of family specialists to implement the spirit and ethos of the Doha Declaration.
6. To publish and bring out timely publications dealing with latest work and research material on Family.

In terms of its broad institutional working format the Doha Family Institute will work in two separate and operative branches, viz:

1. Research and Development, and
2. Implementation and Social Action.

With limited initial staffing this ambitious planning will require additional recruitment and it is planned to do so in the near future, which is a process which I call a “living experiment”.

There exist at the international level a number of institutions which have as their focus the launching of activities which basically defend family values. A few of them are called “international” or are “world ” oriented in their approach since they aim to have both a setup which is truly transnational or alternatively aim to achieve results that are of such a character. So far as I am aware, this is the first institute of this class that has been created in a non Western milieu and in particular in a Muslim environment. I hope therefore that this particular aspect of its genesis will be kept in mind while expanding the current activities of its academic and intellectual work.
Understanding the Islamic Message on Family

Islam places the highest significance in life to the family as an institution, towards its different members and the duty of “care” and responsibility in those that have the worldly ability to provide assistance and help to others in the family that need such aid. The message of Islam is contained in the word of God, the Holy Quran itself. These citations cited in my many works on this subject which are published and also available on the net will hopefully stress the high significance that our faith places on this matter.

Throughout its history Islamic faith has been both deeply cherished and misunderstood for its emphasis on enveloping the entirety of a person’s life with its normative structure of rules of conduct and precepts. Amongst the major norms of such expected behavior are those that are devised to apply to the institution of the family. Simultaneously, the jurisprudence and moral philosophy of the Muslim faith also acutely focuses on the larger matter pertaining to the subject of human rights.

The contemporary Western World similarly accords tremendous significance to these topics. However, as I see it, the evolution of some newer norms and concepts in the international legal field has been such that in respect of crucial details, there is a visible tendency to have the rights of the family give up some of its historical and inherent hierarchical position and status to specific and newly developed “rules” in the broader field of human rights. For instance as Rapporteur of two major international UN sponsored conferences on the “rights” of the Family and the Child in Islamabad last May in 2005 I frankly reported that “rules” of “law” and not merely soft international law was being made by Islamic nations and major Asian countries. The areas that were focused upon pertained to “rights” that were of “reproductive” kind and those loosely referred to as “spanking” practices.

In its newer researches, therefore, I feel that such perspectives will be examined by the experts that work in or for or be guiding this Institute’s operational activities. Given the stark reality that all major Western nations are now set to create perhaps “norms”, some legal in their content, that may work against the traditional concepts of Family, the avocations of Muslim nations in this regard are of paramount significance. It is fact that but for the work of Islamic countries such as Saudi Arabia and Pakistan in particular at the Human Rights Commission, already great damage to doctrinal purity of family may have resulted.

The “expertise” required to give quality to such intellectual research work would be of premier importance to this new institution. As such I have no doubt that the Institute’s Administration will provide the needed direction in harnessing the required talent for this purpose. Since most of current thinking revolves around sociological and legal metamorphosis, collaboration with high level academicians would be helpful from both the domain of social sciences and law to achieve the results and intellectual products that I have in mind.
Be that as it may, the groundwork of a new edifice has been created in the domain of Family studies. I am hopeful that the coming months will be productive from the perspectives of its genesis. Already I am informed by Professor Wilkins that two regional symposia have been held, one in Eastern Europe and another one in East Africa in the last four months since this Institute was formally created in Doha. While media projection is helpful, in the long run the establishment of its reputation depends upon the quality of the work, and the publications it is able to produce. If it undertakes teaching as well, then those who come will be coming to learn and will become the best ambassadors of this new entity after they leave. I wish the Institute success!