



Civilizations Exchange & Cooperation Foundation

2013 Morocco International Observer Program (IOP) Report

Imam Mohamad Bashar Arafat

Virginia, Washington, DC, Maryland and New York

April 14 – 28, 2013

INTRODUCTION

CECF was delighted to partner with the U.S. Embassy in Morocco to conduct, a series of **International Observer Programs (IOP)** funded by the Office of Public Affairs Section. The first successful program took place in March & April of 2011 with six (6) delegates. The second program with the U.S. Embassy in Rabat – Morocco took place from April 14 – 28, 2013 and involved two male and two female delegates representing the Murshideen & Murshidat and Al Rabita al-Muhammadiyya.

MOROCCAN IOP DELEGATES

- Dr. Abdessamad Ghazi
- Mr. Yacine Houhoud
- Ms. Mounia Terraz
- Ms. Zakia Haddad

KEY IOP PERSONNEL

- President of CECF: Imam Mohamad Bashar Arafat
- Programs Director: Kimberly King
- IOP Program Officer & Translator: Ousama Fatima
- Morocco Program Coordinator: Zineb Semmar
- BUBW Conference Coordinator: Hamza Khan
- New York Coordinator: Rev. Masud I. Syedullah

OBJECTIVE

The objective of the IOP is to introduce and engage the participants in discussion on five aspects of the American society:

- Religious and Cultural Pluralism in America Today
- Muslim Life in America - Social, Political and Religious Perspectives
- Contributions of Muslim Americans to the Larger Society
- The Interfaith Movement in America and the Need for Global Interfaith Outreach
- The Richness of Cultural & Religious Diversity from a Global Perspective – Through “observing” the Youth Leadership and Interfaith Conference “*Better Understanding for a Better World*” (BUBW)

IMAMS TRAINING & EXPERIENCES OF AMERICAN IMAMS

Another advantage of the IOP is that an American Imam accompanies the delegates throughout the two-week program. It provides more in depth explanations through numerous personal discussions over meals and during non-business hours on topics such as:

- What does it mean to live in the 21st century - the age of a multi-cultural & multi-religious society in a country like America?
- How can you benefit from your roots in the Arab World?
- Realizing what is missing, if you study “Shar’iah” in the Middle East without studying the “Western Culture”.
- Understanding the value of being involved in International Speaker Programs through U.S. Embassies around the world through the Office of Public Diplomacy at the U.S. Department of State.
- What does it mean to be an advisor for one of the youth exchange programs in the U.S. such as the YES Program?
- What are the Islamic duties needed when involved in interfaith outreach?
- How can interfaith and interreligious dialogue serve economical development and peace around the world?

ORIENTATIONS

There were two types of orientations – pre-departure orientations in Morocco and an arrival orientation in the U.S. Two weeks prior to the delegations departure from Morocco, Imam Arafat traveled to Rabat to meet them and share the overall objective, mission and itinerary of the program. A few days before their departure, Zineb Semmar, CECF Program Coordinator in Morocco, also met with the delegates and briefed them on the logistics (visa fee and travel instructions and expense reimbursement, arrival guidelines and the itinerary).

MEETINGS, SCHEDULE, TOPICS & DISCUSSIONS OF THE 2013 IOP

The participants arrived to the U.S. on the 14th of April for a three-day preliminary visits, meetings, and thoughtful discussions before the BUBW Conference. It was a perfect time to show the need on how to connect the outcome of the BUBW conference with the second part of the IOP, and how to be trained to address the “Global Community” rather than only the Muslim Community.

Virginia Program

On April 15th, we had a thorough arrival orientation in both the morning and the evening, including ppt presentations. The focus was on:

- The goals and objectives of each meeting in the program
- Religion & Culture in a Pluralistic World: The History of Interfaith in America
- How the IOP came into existence
- What is expected from the participants in the U.S.
- What kind of follow up they can do once they return home
- The potential of Alumni and the follow up programs

In between orientation sessions, we visited the **ADAMS Center** in Reston, VA, which served as a model of a Muslim Community in the U.S.

Washington, D.C. Program

Supreme Court: On April 16th, the delegates visited the Supreme Court to learn what it represents in the American Constitution and to be introduced to sources that were considered as the American Constitution was written. They also discussed “*Oral Arguments, the History of the Court and the Architecture*” and “*The History of Separation between Church and State.*”

Library of Congress: It was important to see the Library of Congress and what it represents.

Other Visits in DC: Included sightseeing (the Space Museum, the White House and the Islamic Center of Washington, DC) before they departed to Baltimore.

Maryland Program

On April 17th, we began the full day of activities with a lecture at the Sheraton BWI Hotel by **Mr. Peter Kovach**, a seasoned Foreign Service officer, who has 30 plus years of service in many countries. His lecture focused on “*Public Diplomacy & Interfaith.*”

The lecture was followed by a visit to the **Religious Studies Department at Notre Dame of Maryland University**. The purpose of this visit was to provide the delegates with an example of an American academic institution that offers Islamic Studies. We met with Dean Brian Berry and the Religious Studies Faculty. The discussion focused on variety of topics are taught, interests of the students, especially related to the Islamic Studies courses and what kind of progress it has had over the years.

The delegation left the Catholic University and visited **Masjid Al Haqq**, the biggest mosque in the city of Baltimore. It is one of the very active African American Muslim communities in the inner cities of America. After performing Thuhr prayer and having lunch with community, the discussion focused on the ***Reintegration Process in the Community***. The IOP delegation listened to the role of the mosque in dealing with Muslim inmates, who are released from prisons or the new converts to Islam, who were exposed to drugs and crimes in the city life before embracing Islam. There was an illustration about Social Services and Community Awareness Projects that are run by the mosque. The outreach coordinator spoke about the ***Involvement in Building Communities and Neighborhoods***.

The final meeting of the day was held at the **Baltimore City Police Department Headquarters**. Officer Robert Horne spoke about his important work as ***The Muslim Liaison for the Baltimore City Police Department (BCPD)***. He elaborated on the official support and outreach policies established by the BCPD, his role with the community since his conversion to Islam, and on his efforts as an Acting Muslim Chaplain in the Baltimore prison system.

The day's activities ended with a relaxing evening at the Sheraton BWI Hotel.

Better Understanding for a Better World (BUBW) - April 17 – 21, 2013

As the IOP meetings took place on the 17th, the cultural exchange students arrived to the Sheraton BWI Hotel for the 18th BUBW Conference. This conference brought students representing 35 countries from of the YES, FLEX, CBYX, & A-SMYLE programs. Over the next four (4) days, the IOP delegates had the opportunity to ***“Observe”*** and interact with the students. They witnessed the changes in perceptions and the transformations that took place throughout the conference. The IOP delegates also took part in the discussion on how people, in general, and due to misconceptions of cultural, religious, political, or ethnic reasons, develop hate toward each other. After hearing the main talk, ***The World Today: The Family of Adam and Eve and the Need for Crossing the Divide***, in the plenary session of the conference, the students were able to point out the main reasons of local and global conflicts or tensions during the Interactive Session with Imam Arafat called ***Current Realities in Our World***.

The breakout sessions related to what was discussed in the main plenary discussions. The last part of that day was dedicated to student cultural presentations describing the beauty and uniqueness of their culture.

The main days of the BUBW Conference included Interfaith site visits, a panel discussion, leadership session entitled, *Leadership and Positive Contributions: Your Duty - Locally & Globally*, activities at the Baltimore Inner Harbor and the End of the Conference Banquet & Certificate Ceremony. The 2013 BUBW-Baltimore Conference Itinerary is attached along with this report.

New York Program

In the early afternoon on April 21st we traveled to New York for a two-day program that combined site visits with discussions.

On April 22nd, we visited the **Statue of Liberty Park** and discussed the significance and symbolism of this remarkable statue for America and the World. An interesting observation was made when everyone noticed another statue in the park, not too far from the Statue of Liberty. It was created to symbolize an American soldier from WWII as he was saving a Jewish person during the Holocaust to America during the Nazis atrocities. An observation was made by Imam Arafat: “Imagine how would it be perceived in America, if Morocco would also have a statue about the historical document of December 20, 1777, which recognized the independence of the United States!!!!”

The delegation then visited the **9/11 WTC Memorial** in Lower Manhattan, followed by the controversial site of the **Ground Zero Mosque** that made big news in 2010.

After lunch, we visited the **Islamic Cultural Center of New York** and toured the beautiful mosque and full-time school. The staff, who met with the 2011 IOP-Morocco Delegation, was very hospitable and gave very detailed explanations about the Interfaith activities in New York. Among the issues discussed were the challenges facing Imams in America when they deal with such a diverse Muslim communities and when they are faced with the heavy demand of educating the non-Muslims.

In the evening, we enjoyed the hustle and bustle of **Time Square** in Manhattan.

On April 23rd, the delegates spent time shopping before our main afternoon meeting with the **Archdiocese of New York at The Cathedral of Saint John the Divine**. The delegation was escorted to meet with Bishop Knudsen, Assistant Bishop at the Dioceses, Father Masud Ibn Syedullah, Head of the Christian-Muslim Relations Committee and other staff members in the diocese. After brief remarks about the history of the church and its involvement with the community, the discussion focused on the interfaith work led by the church. Bishop Knudsen was very happy to be in the presence of female Islamic leaders of the delegation and has expressed her admiration of their work in Morocco.

Rev. Masud talked about his desire to build bridges of understanding between his Christian community and Islam since 1991, due to the fact that his father converted to Islam in the 1930s. His mother remained Christian and he grew up in a multi-faith household. This has impacted his work in a very positive manner. He elaborated about his NGO, **Roots and Branches**, which promotes interfaith dialogue. He also spoke about his work with CECF since 2000 and his upcoming collaborative program in Morocco called “*Spirituality & Giving in Ramadan.*”

The delegates spoke about the work they do in Morocco. Mr. Abdessamad Ghazi discussed the role of **Muhammadiyah Foundation** and the reason behind its establishment, especially after the terrorist attack in May 2003 in Morocco. He spoke about the importance of combining spirituality with theology and the three main Islamic bodies in Morocco - The Islamic Affairs and Endowment Ministry, The Supreme Council for Scholars and The **Muhammadiyah Foundation** and the function of each.

The delegates were given a tour of the Cathedral Church and learned about its history and the different phases of construction.

We departed New York in the evening in preparation for the final portion of the program in DC.

Washington, D.C. Program

On April 24th, the main activity was a daylong **Prince Alwaleed Bin Talal Center for Muslim-Christian Understanding (ACMU)** Conference called *A Common Word - The Boundaries of Religious Pluralism & Freedom: The Devil is in the Detail*” at Georgetown University, in Washington, DC. It touched on:

- limits to religious freedom that religions agree on
- challenges of the relationship of law to religion in western democracies and in post Arab spring state building

Afternoon sessions included:

- challenges of religious pluralism in Christians – Muslims relations
- gender and religious freedom in Christian- Muslim relations

The IOP were welcomed to meet privately with **Dr. John L. Esposito**, University Professor, as well as Professor of Religion and International Affairs and of Islamic Studies at Georgetown University. He is also Founding Director of the **Prince Alwaleed Bin Talal Center for Muslim-Christian Understanding** in the Walsh School of Foreign Service.

Dr. Esposito discussed with the IOP delegation:

- his work history with the center, the publications, and the media

- the annual report by the center that talks about each individual effort for the organization and the jobs they do (teach, advise, speak to the media and travel)
- the need for more methodology and women in education
- his happiness to see the female movement in Morocco
- how members of the delegation can first establish their credentials and education, then how they can address some of the hot button issues
- the need for Muslim scholars to be well versed in English today, not only in Arabic, if they want to influence a wider range of people in the west

Each member of the delegation received a book from Mr. Esposito's publication, which was personally autographed by him.

On April 25th, we had a meeting with **Ms. Sita Chakrawarti, Office of International Religious Freedom (IRF)**, wherein she shared some of the objectives and responsibilities of her office and the recent annual International Religious Freedom Report. Her staff welcomed the delegation and listened to them as they described a little about themselves and their professional responsibilities in Morocco. Toward the later part of the meeting, one of the IRF staff shared the concern in Washington over a "Fatwa" that was issued in Morocco by the Scientific Council while the IOP delegation was in the US. The Fatwa permitted killing "apostates". This topic brought a discussion about:

- the importance of understanding circumstances in our time vs. at the time of the Prophet
- the distinction between the concept of "Citizenship" of today vs. Religious Freedom

The delegation then traveled to meet with Ms. Sahar Taman of **American Councils** to discuss the YES Alumni Program (Youth Exchange Series) and the impact on students as they return to their countries of origin.

The final activity of the day involved dinner with the **Faith Community Working Group of Montgomery County**, who responds to acts of violence in unity and hope such as the Boston Bombing, which took place as the delegates arrived to the U.S.

April 26th brought about another very full day, which included a visit to **Capital Hill** and meetings with the staff of **Rep. Keith Ellison and Rep. Andre Carson**. Both visits focused on:

- contributions of the American Muslim Community to the political process in the U.S.
- the importance of Muslims in America to encourage more of the younger generation to get involved in the political process
- a comparison was made between the two (2) Muslim representatives in Congress in America vs. the twenty-five (25) Jewish representatives in Congress given the fact that their populations in America are almost the same

The delegation made **Jumu'ah prayer at the Chapel of the U.S. Congress** along with the congregational staffers of the U.S. Congress and the U.S. Senate.

The last meeting of the day was at the office of the **Islamic Society of North America (ISNA)**. ISNA is one of the main national umbrella organizations of Muslims in America. The delegates listened to the staff as they described the services provided for the diverse Muslim community of North America such as the annual convention and the interfaith activities that aim to building bridges of understanding and cooperation with the entire American society.

As the day came to a close, the delegates were invited for a reception at the **Embassy of the Kingdom of Morocco** in Washington, who is in full support of the goals and mission of the IOP.

Saturday, April 27th, was a day of relaxation and free time to shop.

The delegation observed a Fundraising Dinner hosted by **Al Rahmah School**, a full-time KG-12th grade Islamic School in Baltimore County.

On Sunday, April 28th, we conducted a breakfast reflection session to review the highlights of the entire program and completed the program evaluation. At noon we traveled to Dulles International Airport for the flight to Morocco.

FOLLOW UP SUGGESTIONS

- having a conference in Morocco similar to the **BUBW** for the youth of Morocco and North African countries
- having periodic seminars, in participation with CECF Morocco, addressing current issues, as well as focus on the ***Fiqh of Diplomacy & Outreach***
- participation in the **Ambassadors of Peace (AOP) Program**
- continued participation by Murshideen and Murshidat in the **International Observer Program (IOP)**

SPECIAL THANKS

CECF and its colleagues would like to thank the following personnel for their efforts to make the 2013 IOP-Morocco Program an opportunity from which not only the delegates greatly benefited, but also those who had the good fortune to interact with the delegates.

- Ms. Jennifer Bullock, Cultural Affairs Officer
- Mr. Samuel Werberg, Assistant Cultural Officer
- Mr. Mohammed Guedira, Cultural Affairs Specialist - Public Affairs Section