



Civilizations Exchange & Cooperation Foundation

Muslims in America: Community, Democracy and Political Participation Summary Report



2014 INTERNATIONAL OBSERVER PROGRAM Al Azhar University Delegation

August 20 - September 11, 2014



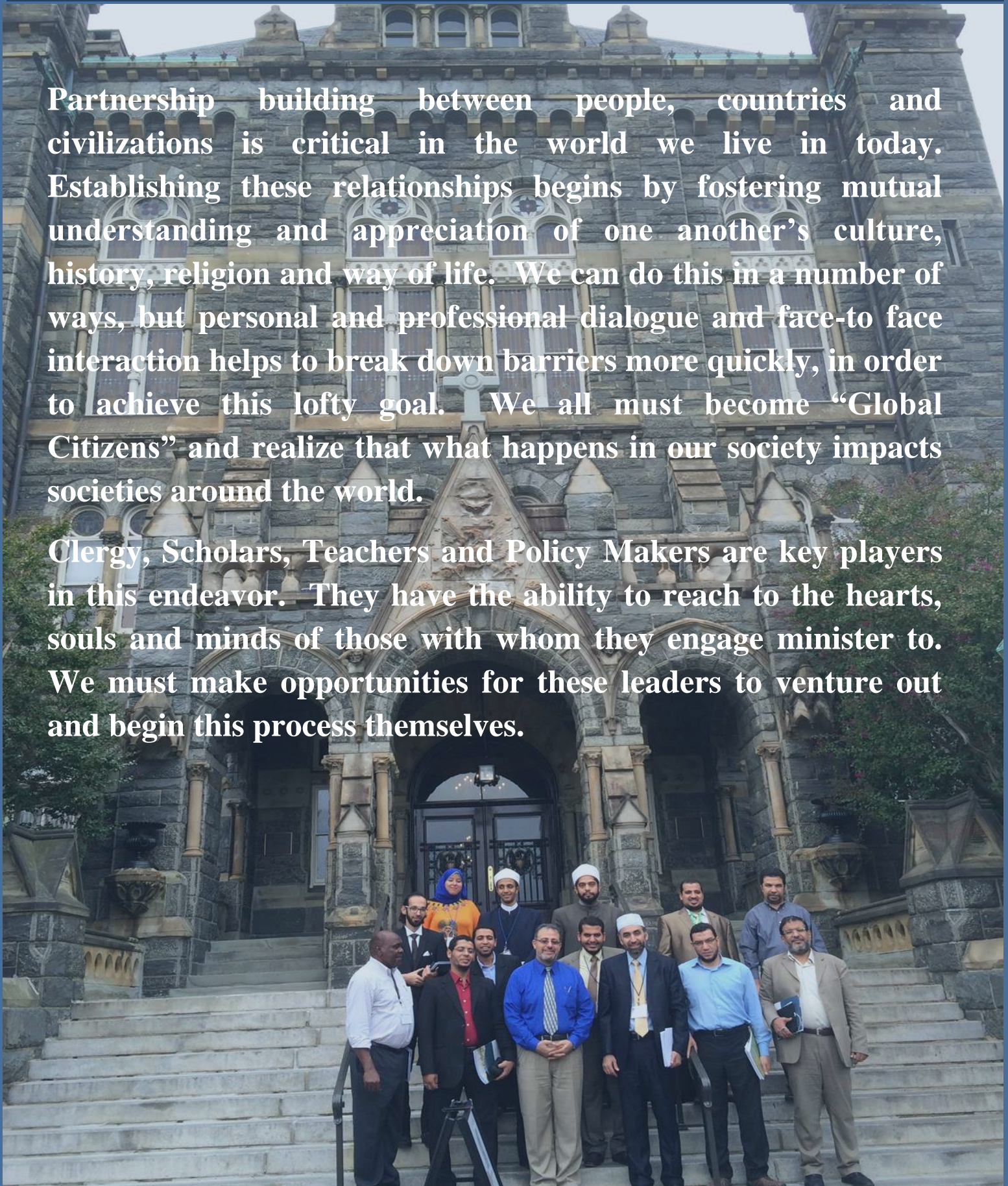
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ABOUT

INTERNATIONAL OBSERVER PROGRAMS

Partnership building between people, countries and civilizations is critical in the world we live in today. Establishing these relationships begins by fostering mutual understanding and appreciation of one another's culture, history, religion and way of life. We can do this in a number of ways, but personal and professional dialogue and face-to face interaction helps to break down barriers more quickly, in order to achieve this lofty goal. We all must become "Global Citizens" and realize that what happens in our society impacts societies around the world.

Clergy, Scholars, Teachers and Policy Makers are key players in this endeavor. They have the ability to reach to the hearts, souls and minds of those with whom they engage minister to. We must make opportunities for these leaders to venture out and begin this process themselves.



AL AZHAR INTERNATIONAL OBSERVER PROGRAMS

IOPs are two or three-week journeys of intensive thought and experience designed for clerics, scholars, religious educators and community leaders. Participants are invited through U.S. Embassies in foreign countries to take part in and observe communities around the U.S.

MUSLIMS IN AMERICA: COMMUNITY, DEMOCRACY AND POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

This program introduces Egyptian Scholars to American Muslim Communities. Middle Eastern countries undergoing rapid social and political change like Egypt can benefit from the exchange of ideas with democratic societies. Opportunities for dialogue are especially important during this historic period following the Arab Spring.

Muslims in America provided scholars from Al Azhar University the opportunity to witness authentic moderate religious education critical for inspiring scholars to engage in collaborative efforts that can provide positive changes across society. The Program challenged them to find their own voice so they could be prepared to advocate for their communities basic health and educational needs. They also witnessed grassroots social and political involvement and realized the importance of living in a society free to exchange ideas and opinions openly.

The United States offers countless examples of both individual and collective success in the areas of interfaith, democracy, and political participation. It is only when everyone feels their voices are being heard and their contributions are welcome, will you have the necessary elements for a secure foundation and a future full of hope, freedom and cooperation.



DIALOGUE



COOPERATION



INTERFAITH



COMMUNITY

2014 PROGRAM AT A GLANCE

August 20-25 – Baltimore, MD - Washington, DC

- Religion & Culture in a Pluralistic World: The History of Interfaith in America
- Integration into American Society – Perspectives and Comparisons from Professionals
- The Jurisprudence of Public Diplomacy in Islam & Global Outreach
- Protection of Religious Freedom

August 26-28 – New York, NY

- Compassion in our Daily Lives: A Call to Action
- The Importance of Outreach
- 9/11 and Efforts to Bring About Better Understanding
- Spirituality and Cooperation Among People of the Book – Where Faith Meets Social Needs

August 29 – Perrysburg, OH

- Interfaith Perspective in the Heart of the U.S.
- Religious Discussion in American Universities

August 30 - September 31 – Detroit, MI

- Celebrating Diversity - ISNA Annual Conference
- Community Service and Giving Back to Society
- The Middle East of the U.S.: Businesses & a Museum

September 1-3 – Los Angeles, CA

- Sunni and Shi'a Relations: Cooperation in the US
- Building a Healthy Society with People of the Book – A Consistent Message in the Qur'an
- Jewish-Muslim Cooperation in American Society
- Partnership in an Ever-Changing World
- Muslim Involvement in a Democratic Society

September 4-5 –Berkeley/San Francisco, CA

- Zaytuna College: Understanding the Foundation and Goals of a Liberal Arts Muslim American Educational Institute

September 6-7 – Baltimore, MD

- Involvement in Building Communities and Neighborhoods
 - Muslim Officers in Law Enforcement
 - Prominent Roles of African American Muslims in Reintegration Process, Social Services and Community Awareness Projects in the city
- A Common Effort: American Christian Response to a Common Word (A Continuous Project Shared by Both Muslims and Christians)

September 8-11 – Washington, DC

- The Role of NGOs in Promoting Interfaith Relations History of Separation between Church and State
- Preparing U.S. Diplomats for a Multi-Religious & Multi-Cultural World
- Al Basheer Seminary & a Shari'ah Curriculum for the 21st Century
- Muslim Participation in a Democratic Society

REFLECTIONS ON THE AL AZHAR 2014 IOP JOURNEY

The 2014 International Observers Program combined a mixed group of Al Azhar graduates and representatives of Al Awqaf and the Office the Grand Mufti. It was marked with numerous enriching and engaging moments. For many participants this was a journey of self-exploration, challenging their preconceived notions and moving them towards being not just Egyptians, but citizens of a global society.

The three-week experience marked for many the first exposure to Western Culture and challenged their concepts of what it is to be a Muslim in a multi-cultural and multi- religious society such as the U.S. where you are the minority. As Scholars of the preeminent Islamic University, they are in the unique position to influence the knowledge and attitudes presented to future Islamic leaders. As their country and the Islamic world are reshaped by the impacts of the Arab Spring and other factors, the Program has provided them with the experiential context of what it means to practice religion in a free and open society. People cannot advocate for what they do not understand or know. The International Observer Program supplied a foundation from which to build upon and prepare them to advocate for new paradigms in their own communities.

This final report highlights only a few key events that epitomize the journey, which the Egyptian Delegation experienced while traveling in America. The examples selected show a foundation of new experiences from which the Scholars can apply to their work and lives in Egypt. These examples exemplify key concepts of the Program that include:

- Developing future globally-minded Islamic Scholars and the role of understanding the West in fostering these leaders
- Practicing religion in democratic societies and the importance of inter-faith and Intra-faith cooperation
- Opportunities for improved secular relations and finding common ground

Islamic Scholarship in America: Changing Conventional Models for Educating Islamic Leaders in the 21st Century



The Delegation traveled to visit with Zaytuna College, an Islamic Higher Education College, located in the San Francisco Bay Area. Zaytuna was established by a premier American-born Islamic Scholar, Shaykh Hamza Yusuf, in an effort to make Islamic education accessible to qualified American students. The experience at Zaytuna and conversations with board members and faculty challenged the beliefs that a strong Islamic education could not be gained outside of an Islamic society. The Delegation were impressed to see curricula that mirrored the level provided through Al Azhar University, which in many ways benefited from being taught in a society founded on democratic principles that are inherent to the teachings of Islam.

Zaytuna College is working to function at a level comparable to the best religious seminaries and general institutions of higher education in the U.S., in order to produce western born religious scholars. The Delegation saw the importance of developing future scholars that have a sophisticated understanding of the intellectual history and culture of the West that could meet the needs of our changing world.

Although suspicion directed toward Muslims is a continuing issue in the United States, the West is also demonstrating a desire to create a more open and tolerant society. Zaytuna College provides a realistic model of how Western countries can produce educated Islamic scholars, who can represent Islam as a viable and relevant faith in the West, as well as in the Middle East.

Sectarian violence persists in many countries throughout the Middle East and is a major element of friction between the two sects of Islam. Tensions are often played upon in political and cultural conflicts that aim to continue discord throughout the Islamic World. However, the Delegation experienced a counter perspective on Sunni and Shi'a relations in the U.S. that is not often experienced in Islamic cultures today.

A true spirit of cooperation was experienced by the Delegation on a visit to a Shi'a Community in Orange County, CA and marked the first time that some of the IOP scholars had entered a Shi'a mosque or engaged in thoughtful discussion over a dinner reception organized by a Shi'a community. This experience provided a foundation for how to participate in more cooperative dialogues and how to establish relationships with Shi'a groups in their own society. Those relations are only possible if the sects acknowledge the vast similarities that connect them rather than focusing heavily on distinctions in practice and ideology that often separate Sunnis and Shi'a today. The Scholars were able to experience these similarities first-hand and left with a profound experience from which to pull from and apply in their own lives when they returned home.

Promoting Interfaith Opportunities in Communities: Foundations for Understanding, Cooperation & Trust

The Interfaith movement in America grew much stronger after the 9-11 terrorist attacks. The community, at large, felt that the only protection we would have against ignorance, prejudice and misperceptions is "*Interfaith Outreach and Education*".

Participating in interfaith events throughout the program led to several of the more spiritual and emotional moments of the trip. Jewish, Christian and Islamic clergy gathered for interfaith activities that showcased the practices of the Abrahamic Religions and focused on the Universal nature and message of these world faiths.

- Imam Mohamad Bashar Arafat brought the delegation to the *MCC Medical Clinic*. Their mission is to provide compassionate and high quality medical care to uninsured, indigent adult residents of our community regardless of race, religion, ethnicity, gender, or national origin. It opened its doors in 2003 with the commitment to provide high quality basic healthcare services free to the uninsured population of age 18 and above of the community. It has assembled a remarkable group of volunteer physicians and staff who not only share their vision, dedication and commitment but also donate their expertise and personal funds to this noble cause.
- Included in the program in New York was a meeting at the *Cathedral of Saint John the Divine* with Representatives of the Archbishop of New York, Delegates of an Interfaith study program in Morocco with CECF in July 2014 called *Spirituality and Giving in Ramadan*, Members of the Episcopal-Muslim Outreach Committee and the President of Roots & Branches: Programs for Spiritual Growth. This gathering of Christian Clergy elaborated on the kind of "Faith-Based Activities" that are carried out by the Episcopal Community in New York and also discussed their involvement in CECF's Interfaith Study Program in Morocco in 2014.
- The 2014 IOP-Egypt delegation visited *Bowling Green University* in Toledo, Ohio led by Dr. Lara Martin Lengel. This activity provided the delegates with an opportunity to speak with American College students, living in the heart of America, who were learning about the Middle East and the relation between America and other Muslim countries. The Q & A session proved to be one of the most memorable experiences in the program.



Promoting Interfaith Opportunities in Communities: Foundations for Understanding, Cooperation & Trust

- The meeting in Los Angeles, CA at **Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion and the Center for Muslim-Jewish Dialogue** took the delegates by surprise. Rabbi Rueven Firestone welcomed the group and paired each delegate with a Jewish seminarian. The pairs began an exercise of reading translated texts from the Qur'an and the Torah to demonstrate how Jewish Rabbinical institutions study and discuss theological issues. Our delegates realized the need for non-Arabic speaking Muslims to have more precise English translations of the Qur'an as they worked to accurately convey the true meaning of the verses of the Qur'an to their Jewish counterpart. This exercise was meant to improve the understanding of Muslims and Jews about each other's religion. It was for the first time they took part in such an activity and wished they had more time for a full day seminar on the topic.
- A meeting at the **Baltimore City Police Department (BCPD)** with Major William Marcus, Officer Robert Horne, Liaison to the Muslim Community in Baltimore, who spoke excellent Arabic due to his studies in countries in the Middle East and at Al Azhar. Also invited to the meeting was Robert Ford, Former Ambassador to Iraq and Syria, who is a resident of Baltimore. It was an amazing experience for the delegates to hear from the police about the way they address Community Relations and ensure that everyone is protected. Among many issues discussed were the important roles that Officer Horne plays as the Liaison to the Muslim Community in Baltimore, Chaplain in the prison system and an educational resource for his fellow colleagues.
- A particular honor for one of the delegates, Sheikh Ahmed Bahaa Eldin Mohamed Anis, was to recite verses from the Holy Qur'an and speak on behalf of the delegation from the pulpit during the Service to the community members at **Shrine of the Sacred Heart Catholic Church** in Baltimore on Sunday, September 7th, in the presence of Archbishop of Baltimore, William Lori and Rev. William Au. The entire service that day focused on the concept of forgiveness and the emotions were palpable with visible tears being shed by some of the participants from across the faiths.

The evocative nature of this Anniversary provided pivotal opportunities to show the importance of interfaith efforts in modern society. Although tensions between religions do persist, people continue to be open and respectful of each other's faiths in America. This concept was further reinforced after the ceremony at the reception when members of the church welcomed the Delegation to complete their noon and afternoon prayers (Thuhr & Asr) in one of the church halls.



Impacts of the 2014 IOP: THOUGHTS FROM THE ALUMNI

Since returning to Egypt, the program continues to influence the Al Azhar Scholars. Many still engage regularly with Imam Mohamad Bashar Arafat seeking continued guidance and support as they apply the skills and knowledge learned during the International Observer Program.

Dr. Mohammad Ashmawi, in particular, suggested continuing the dialogue by calling for a conference on interfaith and moderation by using the personality of the 20th century scholar, Dr. Mohammed Al-Ghazali of Egypt.

As Egypt establishes a Democratic government, these Scholars have the benefit of experiencing Islam in a democratic society. They will serve as ambassadors of positive change passing this knowledge and experience on to their students and encouraging exchange rather than isolation between the faiths and cultures the exist in our world today.



Civilizations Exchange & Cooperation Foundation (CECF) would like to give special thanks to the U.S. Embassy in Cairo – Egypt for supporting the 2014 International Observer Program (*IOP*)



CECF Staff and Volunteers wish the International Observer Program Delegates much success and happiness in their future endeavors.

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