



Civilizations Exchange & Cooperation Foundation

Muslims in America: Community, Interfaith, Democracy and Political Participation

Summary Report – Part 1



2015 INTERNATIONAL OBSERVER PROGRAM (IOP-Egypt) Al Azhar Delegation

October 12-26, 2015

DELEGATES

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**Cairo ~ Baltimore ~ Salt Lake City ~ Baltimore ~ Silver Spring ~ Washington
~Arlington ~ Baltimore ~ Cairo**

INTERNATIONAL OBSERVER PROGRAMS

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

From February through April, delegates may also be able to “observe” the international youth leadership, intercultural and interfaith conference called ***Better Understanding for a Better World***, which is known to high school exchange students as the ***BUBW***.

MUSLIMS IN AMERICA: COMMUNITY, INTERFAITH, DEMOCRACY AND POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

This particular program introduces Egyptian Imams and community leaders to American Muslim Communities and a wide array of religious communities involved in interfaith activities. North African and Middle Eastern countries undergoing social and political changes like Egypt can benefit from the exchange of ideas with other societies. Opportunities for face-to-face dialogue are especially important.

Muslims in America helped provide these influential leaders with the opportunity to witness authentic moderate religious education critical for inspiring scholars to engage in collaborative efforts within their community and with the broader community that can provide positive changes across the global society. The program challenged them to find their own voices so they can advocate for their communities basic societal, political and educational needs. They also witnessed grassroots social and political involvement and realized the importance of living in a society where people are free to exchange ideas and opinions openly.

The United States offers countless examples of both individual and collective success in the areas of community development, 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



UNDERSTANDING



COMMUNITY



INTERFAITH

October 12-14 (MD)

- Program Orientation
 - Religion & Culture in a Pluralistic World: The History of Interfaith in America
 - 9/11 and Efforts to Bring About Better Understanding
 - Integration into American Society – Professional Perspectives and Processes in the U.S. compared to the Middle East

October 14-19 (UT)

- “Reclaiming the Heart of our Humanity: Working Together for a World of Compassion, Peace, Justice and Sustainability”

The 2015 Parliament's speakers comprise:

- Nobel Peace Laureates including Costa Rica's two-time President, the Spiritual Leader of Tibetan Buddhism, and a mother who helped put an end to sectarian violence in a war-torn Northern Ireland;
- The United States Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom;
- Top religious scholars, writers, speakers and activists achieving compassion, peace, justice and sustainability;
- A Lakota nation tribal leader who is a global defender of sacred sites;
- News media icons pointing global attention to issues like racial and interreligious relations, income equality, immigration, and the human rights and dignity of women, children, and all oppressed peoples.
- Religious and spiritual luminaries strengthening the interfaith movement for our future
- Building a Healthy Society with People of the Book - A Consistent Message in the Qur'an
- Interfaith Perspectives
- Compassion and Justice in our Daily Lives: A Call to Action
- Interreligious and Intercultural Dialogue for Youth
- Emerging Leaders
- Responsibly and Effectively Promoting Messages and Activities of Peace and Reconciliation on Social Media
- Process of Interpretation of Scriptures
- Democracy & Religious Diversity
- Interreligious Peace Building

October 20-21 (MD)

- Involvement in Building Communities and Neighborhoods
 - Volunteerism, Community Service and Giving Back to Society
 - Leading Diverse Communities in America
 - Jewish-Muslim Cooperation in American Society
- Building a Healthy Society with People of the Book - A Consistent Message in the Qur'an
 - Prominent Roles of African American Muslims in the Reintegration Process, Social Services and Community Awareness Projects in Baltimore City (*Inner Cities in America*)
 - Government Initiatives and Partnerships with the Middle Eastern Community in Maryland

October 22-24 (DC, VA)

- History of Separation between Church and State
- Protection of Religious Freedom
- The Role of NGOs in Promoting Interfaith Relations
- Muslim Involvement & Participation in a Democratic Society
- Imams Training and Potential Follow Up Activities for IOP Alumni
 - Islamic Education in the U.S.
 - Follow up Activities

October 25-26 (MD)

- Muslim Involvement & Participation in a Democratic Society “continued”
- Open Windows Festival at St. Mary's Seminary & University – “From Strangers to Friends: The Future of Ecumenical & Interfaith Relations”
- Preparing for the Journey Home

INTERNATIONAL OBSERVER PROGRAMS (IOP)

Partnership building between people, countries and civilizations is critical in our world today and is the basis upon which we tailor our International Observer Programs. 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 interactions help to break down barriers more quickly, in order to achieve this lofty goal. Ultimately, we all must become "Global Citizens" and realize that what happens in our society impacts societies around the world.



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

Throughout this report, you will read about and view pictures of a sampling of meetings, activities and the conferences in which the delegation was involved.



The *Supreme Court* is the only court in America established by the Constitution of the United States. It is the final judge in all cases involving laws of Congress and the highest law of the Constitution. However, one should keep in mind that its power is limited by the other two branches of government.

After many years of working with the Supreme Court, CECF coordinated a meeting for the delegates in the private lounge of the Justices of the Supreme Court. The delegates were very interested as they learned about the history of the Supreme Court, sources of law that the American Constitution was drawn from and the nature of the judicial system that is followed in the U.S. They had a chance to ask questions and also sit in the court chamber that considers the concepts of "*Religious Freedom*" and "*Separation Between Church and State*".

THE 2015 IOP EGYPT JOURNEY

The 2015 International Observer Program combined a group of men and women from Al Azhar, who are Imams, Community Leaders, Teachers and Professionals. 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 leaders in Egypt, but citizens of a global society and leaders in the world.

The two-week experience marked for many the first exposure to Western Culture, as well as Far Eastern Culture and interaction with people of many faith and cultural traditions. It 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 Muslims are the minority. Given their backgrounds, they are in the unique position to influence the knowledge and attitudes presented to future Islamic leaders in the Middle East. As their country and the Islamic world are reshaped by events around the world, including the impact of the Arab Spring in the Middle East, this 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 the needs of everyone in their society and for new paradigms in their own communities.

This final report highlights only a few key events that epitomize their journey, while traveling in America. The examples selected show a foundation of new experiences from which these scholars can apply to their personal, spiritual and professional lives in Egypt. These examples exemplify key concepts of the program that include:

- Developing future global-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



2015 Parliament of the World's Religions Conference

Salt Palace Convention Center, Salt Lake City, Utah, USA

CECF has been working with the U.S. Embassy in Cairo and Al Azhar Delegations since 2011, but this was the first year they were given the unique and rare opportunity to attend this international conference and see such a diversity of religions and interfaith collaborations. All of the delegates said they encountered people of faith traditions that they have never met before. Initially it was an uncomfortable and challenging experience for some of them. It was only through continued interactions, discussions and attentive listening over the 5-day period that they were able to better understand how living in a pluralistic society might be and eliminate some misconceptions.

Attending many workshops and lectures by scholars from all over the world was an eye-opening experience for the delegates. They all agreed that they wished they had time in Egypt to better prepare for this conference. They gained so much and after returning to Egypt, they will be able to build upon this experience and conduct the necessary research in their respective areas of expertise.

The Guiding Principles of the 2015 Parliament:

1. Respectful dialogue: We listen and speak with respect
2. Non-proselytizing: We do not attempt to convert others or speak derogatorily about any tradition
3. Willingness to explore a wide variety of topics: We embody compassion as we engage in difficult conversations

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Salt Palace Convention Center, Salt Lake City, Utah, USA

THE OPENING CEREMONY AND PROCESSION SET THE TONE FOR THE CONFERENCE

“The time to come together has finally arrived! People of faith working together for a more peaceful, just and sustainable world are assembled once again in the USA for the first time in more than 20 years. We join forces with the next generation of interfaith men and women ready to lead the movement forward. The Indigenous nations of Utah and the Grand Basin will lead a Grand Procession of spiritual luminaries from traditions around the world and offer prayer, performance, and encouraging words of wisdom. Hosts from the State of Utah and Salt Lake, in addition to local religious leaders, reflect upon the significance of the world’s religions working in harmony. Answering a call to all communities of faith and goodwill, the Parliament opening celebration will ignite our spirits of togetherness to face our global challenges as a community.”



The reflection sessions and discussions among the participants throughout the program at the PoWR were very rich. Questions arose about other faith traditions and the very active role of women in these faith traditions. The delegation also had many thoughts when they saw the movement of “Women Angels”, who were visible throughout the conference. Personal discussions with other attendees were shared in the daily reflection sessions and over meals.

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Some additional observations and thoughts during the reflection sessions were:

- One delegate highlighted the importance of the governor's visit to the conference. For him, it reflects the cooperation, which occurs between the religious organizations and the State. He also stated that the women presence was obvious - the number of women presenting, emphasizes the role of women within the religious institutions.
- Another delegate spoke about the theme of marketing, the role of the organizers in reaching out to local people, how everyone is part of the team, and the importance of the voluntary work in the American society.
- One delegate commented on the fact that the conference, despite its importance in tackling conflict zones between religions and its role in the peace process, it lacks the decision makers, which in his opinion, are the politicians.
- Many participants stressed the role of the media in such big events and how to advertise these events to the multitude, and to the international media.



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American Indian groups living in Utah include the Ute, Paiute, Goshute, Shoshone, and Navajo and some of the tribes participated and presented.

There were nearly 9,800 participants from 73 countries, representing 30 major religions and 548 sub-traditions at the conference.

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KAICID's session "Intensive Course on Interreligious Peace Building", led by Professor Abu Nimr, was quite thought-provoking and caused everyone to look deep within themselves and reflect on the teachings of their own faith tradition.

This session combined the moral teachings that are shared by all religions and the best techniques to resolve conflicts domestically, socially and globally, while focusing on the role of cultural diversity between the followers of the same religion and how understanding the diversity could be used to build peace.

A few other sessions attended were:

- Clarifying Misconceptions about Islam and Muslims – A Step Toward Defeating ISIS and Extremism
- War, Violence and Hate
- Social Media Training
- Reclaiming the Common Heritage – An Interactive Muslim-Christian Dialogue
- Faith at the United Nations: Sustainable Development Goals, Peace and Interfaith Understanding

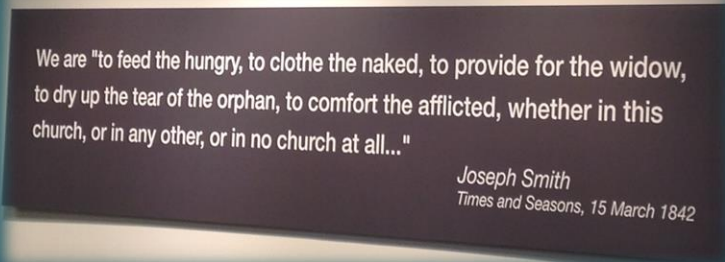
Latter-day Saint Humanitarian Center & Tour

“The Mormon Experience”

TOUR & ACTIVITY SUMMARY

We were given a tour of the Latter-day Saint Humanitarian Center, which was established in 1991 in Salt Lake City, Utah to prepare humanitarian supplies for use worldwide and train those desiring to develop employable skills to become self-reliant.

We were told, “wherever possible, humanitarian supplies are acquired in or near the area where they are needed. In some cases, supplies are shipped from Salt Lake City. The humanitarian supplies required by the Church include clothing, hygiene and school kits, emergency medical modules, and quilts. These items are processed and prepared for shipment to where they are needed most. In a typical year, the Latter-day Saint Humanitarian Center will ship about 8 million pounds of shoes and clothing, 300,000 hygiene and school kits, and 12,000 quilts to relieve suffering in more than 50 countries.”



Latter-day Saint Humanitarian Center & Tour

“The Mormon Experience”

An inspiring number of major projects undertaken worldwide by this center are shown below.

HUMANITARIAN SERVICES Food Production & Nutrition



2014 Beneficiaries: 24,800 in 17 countries



HUMANITARIAN SERVICES Clean Water



2014 Beneficiaries: 1 million people in 26 countries



HUMANITARIAN SERVICES Immunization



2014 Beneficiaries: 9 campaigns in 9 countries



HUMANITARIAN SERVICES Neonatal Resuscitation



2014 Beneficiaries: 30,200 in 42 countries



TRAINING PROGRAM

“At any given time, approximately 200 individuals – mostly refugees and immigrants – are being trained at the center to join the workforce and become self-reliant. These associates represent as many as 30 countries and 20 different languages and many attend English classes during their training. Associates are assigned a job coach who teaches work skills and emphasizes the importance of attendance, punctuality, personal hygiene, and other basic life skills. Training typically lasts up to 18 months, after which assistance is provided in finding long-term employment.”



Latter-day Saint Humanitarian Center & Tour “The Mormon Experience”

Meeting and engaging in discussion with followers of the Mormon faith was new to the delegates. None of them agreed with the theological concept of the Church, but all of them were amazed with the level of networking, the business structure and the devotion of their missionary activities.

CECF's goal was to share with the delegates the experience of freedom of religion, speech, press and others, which exists in America.

Aside from the agreement to disagree with some of the theology of the Mormon's faith, the fact that they have the freedom to live according to their faith traditions and thrive, demonstrates to people around the world the importance of our constitution and the rights guaranteed to all, as well as honest and clean competition in charitable and philanthropic work that benefits those in need globally.



Quilted and tied quilts are intended to warm not only the body, but the spirit.



Many of the delegates noted in their IOP evaluation that the guided tour of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, also known as the Mormon Temple in Salt Lake City by Elder Don R. Clarke, the Temple Square and the Humanitarian Center were highlights of their visit to Utah.