



Civilizations Exchange & Cooperation Foundation

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

Summary Report – Part 2



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

October 12-26, 2015

DELEGATES

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Mr. Ahmed Shaaban Abdellatif Aly

Ms. Heba Ahmed Rezk Sanid

Imam Hossameldin Attetf Mohamed Allam

Ms. Rehab Abdelmohsen Mohammad Ali Abuelsoud

Mr. Ahmed Rabie Mohamed Hassane

Ms. Asmaa Ahmed Ali Ahmed

Ms. Rasha Rizk Ali Abouzid

Mr. Mohamed Khaled Mohamed Sayed



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

Islamic Education in America & Educating Islamic Leaders in the 21st Century



The delegates visited Al Basheer Seminary, an Islamic educational institution, founded by Imam Mohamad Bashar Arafat and located in Baltimore, MD. He established this seminary, interfaith center and institute in an effort to make Islamic education accessible to members of the American society. Clergy and scholars from abroad will also be interested in attending courses, programs and conferences offered. The seminary will provide a strong Islamic education for up and coming Imams, who will live in and understand the culture of the U.S. and the difficulties that people in this society face.

Al Basheer 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 delegates understand the importance of developing future scholars that have a sophisticated understanding of the intellectual history and culture of the West, which 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. Al Basheer 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 North Africa and 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 world.

Education in various forms and spirituality are very important to build a cohesive society that welcomes involvement of not only men, but also women and children. Combining spirituality in education, social and political engagement and empowering youth and women to live up to their potential and serve as inspiration in so many fields throughout the society.

The two seminars of the Imams Training took place at the beginning and at the end of the program. The first training focused on the proper understanding of the globalized world of today and the position of the Muslim community in a pluralistic Middle East. in comparison to the bigger picture of the "pluralistic world" of today.

The second Imams Training drew examples from the meetings, interactions and discussions that took place throughout the two-week program. As we began reflecting on the delegates impressions, they realized how much the Imams and community activities of today require emphasizing on peaceful interactions with others. The negative impacts on the social, economical and intellectual well-being of society are quite evident when radical interpretations of religion replace the teachings that invite Muslims to be global citizens, to lead and compete in knowledge, science, technology and, above all, to be a role model of civility and display respect of cultural and religious diversity.



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

Islamic Community Involvement

CECF arranged for the delegation to visit and tour the *Muslim Community Center in Silver Spring, Maryland* and the *MCC Medical Clinic*. This community is one of the most active communities in the state of Maryland.

The mission of the **Muslim Community Center (MCC)** is to promote brotherhood and human dignity among all by developing an environment of understanding, compassion, and justice in personal and professional life. MCC strives to serve the needs of the Muslim community and community at-large in a manner that promotes its positive image and standing in a changing environment. It also represents the Muslim community in interfaith circles, in government, public and media relations, and in the society at-large.



The mission of the **MCC Medical Clinic** 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.



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Societal & Professional Involvement

A meeting at the *Baltimore City Police Department (BCPD)* with Major William Marcus, Officer Robert Horne, Liaison to the Muslim Community in Baltimore. Officer Horne spoke excellent Arabic due to his studies in countries in the Middle East. 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.



MUSLIMS IN AMERICA

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

Baltimore's Community Development

After departing the Baltimore City Police, we visited the Inner Harbor, which attracts a significant amount of tourism for the State of Maryland. We arrived to the Muslim Cultural Community Center (MCCC), which is one of the most vibrant of the African American Muslim Communities in Baltimore. Imam Earl ElAmin and members of his community welcomed us and shared the “history of Islam in the U.S. and the evolution of his community” with us as we toured his center. It is important to mention that all members of local law enforcement in Baltimore recognize the positive role of African American Muslims in community building and development.



Politics, Education, Religion and Societal Involvement

The meeting at the U.S. Department of State was an amazing opportunity for the delegates to see how well integrated Muslims are in America and how members of all segments of society cooperate with each other as “Americans”.



During our visit to the Library of Congress, the delegates were granted a private visit to a section that is open only to “registered researchers” at the Library. They learned about the way research takes place and the way books are kept when they enter special, private chambers that are designed only for the oldest and rarest of books.

As the delegates toured Washington, DC and visited sites like the White House and memorials, they talked with our cultural guide about universities in the U.S. and about her experiences as well. The freedoms about which the delegates have been learning such as freedom of speech, freedom of religion, freedom of assembly, freedom of press, etc... are practiced and supported by U.S. citizens regardless of their perspectives and backgrounds.



Politics, Education, Religion and Societal Involvement



The delegates prayed Juma'a prayer (Friday Community Prayer) on Capital Hill in Washington, DC. Imam Hossam gave the Khutbah and led the prayer. The number of Muslims (men and women) that attended this service was such a surprise to the delegation. The attendees were congregational staff, people who work at in surrounding government and non-government organizations, as well as local university students. America has and continues to make room in society for its citizens to live a full life with the potential to prosper.



The delegates were pleased to see a different view of America from the inside in contrast to the picture that is portrayed by the media or the misperceptions of people in the Middle East and elsewhere outside the U.S.



Having a program at the Congress and the Senate, meetings and conversations with staffers of Senators and Congressmen was an extremely useful component of the program. The delegates had an appointment with the Office of the Muslim Congressman Keith Ellison, but it was canceled due to unexpected travel. The delegates were still able to enjoy the rest of the substituted events, which included a longer visit at the Library of Congress.

The National Air and Space Museum of the Smithsonian Institution and their choice of another museum in the area were leisurely activities that they enjoyed, as well as free-time to shop in Fashion Centre at Pentagon City.

Politics, Education, Religion and Societal Involvement

Home Visit with a Successful Egyptian American Muslim – Mrs. Mimi Hassanein

Mrs. Mimi Hassanein - President of the Muslim Democratic Party in Maryland

The home visit was one of the most interesting events for the delegates. This is one example of a success story of an Arab American family of Egyptian origin, who settled in the U.S. more than 35 years ago. The family of Mimi Hassanein was not only successful in business, but they are also known philanthropists in Montgomery County in the state of Maryland. Mrs. Hassanein is very involved politically and has a successful school and childcare center.

She discussed the difficulty she and her husband faced due to the ignorance of the American society almost four decades ago about Islam and Arabs, in general, when they migrated to the U.S. She spoke about the reality of America and how each minority group has had to fight for their rights and “their seat around the table”. The delegates were amazed with her leadership and very engaged as they listened to her story. One of them said that their program experience would definitely have been missing an important component, if they did not have the opportunity to visit with her in her house and hear about her personal experiences in the U.S.



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

Open Windows Interfaith Festival at St. Mary's Seminary and Ecumenical Institute

The interfaith experience of Muslims in America is an advanced one. Outreach activities increased substantially 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"*.

Participation in interfaith events throughout the program led to several spiritual moments as Christian and Islamic clergy showcased practices of the Abrahamic Religions and focused on the universal nature and message of these world faiths.

In Baltimore, the delegation participated in the *Open Windows Interfaith Festival at St. Mary's Seminary and Ecumenical Institute*, which was followed by a tour of this historic seminary. This one-day conference was a unique experience for Al Azhar students and spending a whole day at the oldest Catholic Seminary in America was of great interest.

The delegates met with representatives of the Archbishop of Baltimore, participants of an Interfaith community in the Baltimore-Washington Metropolitan area and elaborated on the kind of "faith-based activities" that are being carried out. One of the main issues discussed during the conference was the Vatican II and its relation on the Muslim-Christian relation. Aside from the deep discussion and the interaction of the participants with the audience during the sessions and over lunch, it was an opportunity to examine closely the way Seminaries are run in America. Having discussions with seminarian students, who live on the second floor, was very important. Rev. D. Brent Laytham, Dean of St. Mary's Ecumenical Institute provided the delegates with a tour the seminary and the Ecumenical Institute at the end of the conference.

An "unintended" topic about the books on Islam were brought up when the delegates where in the main library of the Seminary & the Ecumenical Institute. Al Azhar students where at loss as they first entered the library and did not notice any credible books on Islam. As they continued, they found shelves filled with many sound books that can provide the information on needed topics as the students are writing papers and conducting research.



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

Open Windows Interfaith Festival at St. Mary's Seminary and Ecumenical Institute



Impacts of the 2015 IOP: THOUGHTS FROM THE ALUMNI

Since returning to Egypt, the program continues to influence the delegates. Many of them still engage regularly with Imam Mohamad Bashar Arafat and CECF staff seeking continued guidance, support and opportunities for cooperation as they see issues with a renewed perspective and knowledge learned during the 2015 International Observer Program (IOP).

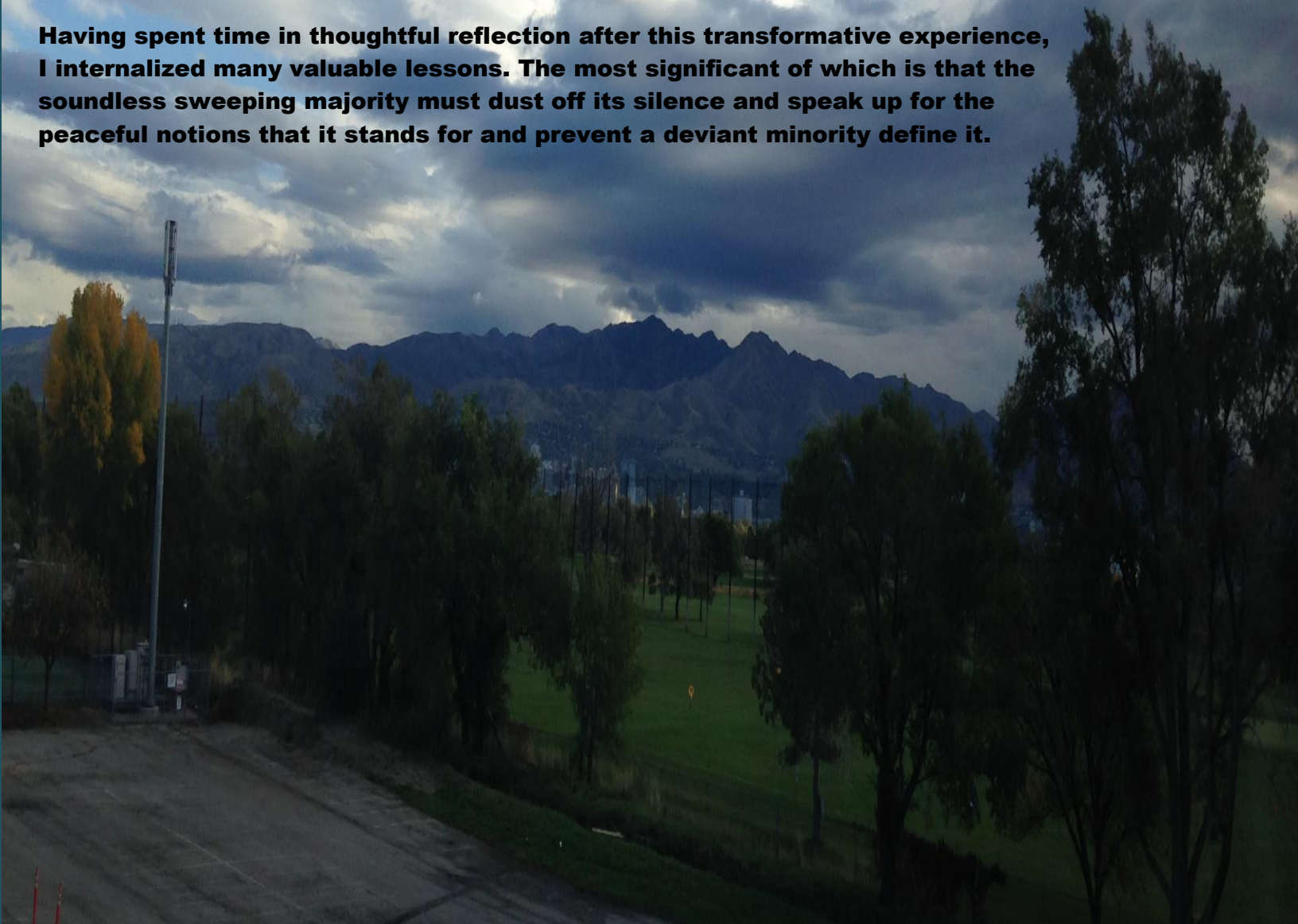
Imam Hossameldin Attet Mohamed Allam has been quite active in Al Azhar with his students.

The group is in touch with CECF in Egypt and they are looking forward to the IOP-Alumni Conference scheduled to take place in Egypt. All of the delegates have been involved in intra-faith and/or inter-faith dialogue at some level and continue to follow the path of moderation and call for more involvement with the interfaith community, locally and globally.

They have had the benefit of experiencing Islam in a very diverse democratic society. They have and will continue to serve as ambassadors of positive change passing this knowledge and experience on to their communities and encouraging dialogue and exchange rather than isolation and conflict between the faiths and cultures that exist in our world today.

Five months after completing this program, Imam Hossam shares his thoughts:

Having spent time in thoughtful reflection after this transformative experience, I internalized many valuable lessons. The most significant of which is that the soundless sweeping majority must dust off its silence and speak up for the peaceful notions that it stands for and prevent a deviant minority define it.



Civilizations Exchange & Cooperation Foundation (CECF) would like to give special thanks to the U.S. Embassy in Egypt for supporting the 2015 International Observer Program (*IOP-Egypt*)



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



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