



# Civilizations Exchange & Cooperation Foundation



## 2016 International Observer Program - Egypt

### Diversity in America: Interfaith, Community, Democracy and Inclusiveness

October 30, 2016 – November 14, 2016  
Summary Report

Cairo ~ Baltimore ~ Delaware ~ New York City ~ Washington, DC ~ Virginia

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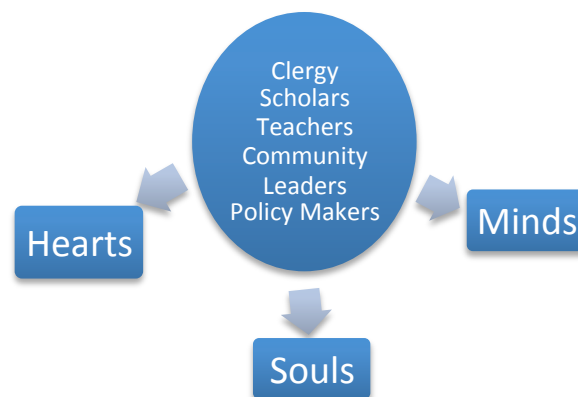
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Civilizations Exchange & Cooperation Foundation (CECF)

## International Observers Programs (IOP)

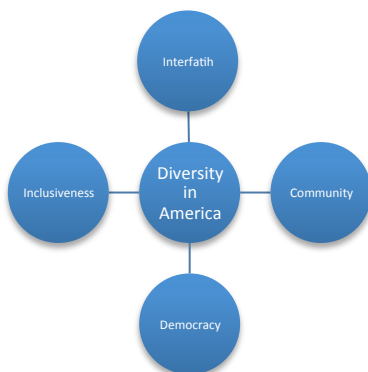
Partnership building between people, countries and civilizations is critical in our world today and is the basis upon which we tailor our *International Observer Programs*. Establishing these relationships begins by fostering mutual understanding and appreciation of one another's culture, history, religion 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.

*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. Throughout the program, the delegates travel with an American imam, Imam Mohamad Bashar Arafat, who has a great deal of experience with various Muslim cultures from around the world and is able to help the delegates make connections between each part of the program and their own unique religious, cultural and professional backgrounds. 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*.

## Diversity in America: Interfaith, Community, Democracy and Inclusiveness



This particular *IOP* entitled *Diversity in America: Interfaith, Community, Democracy and Inclusiveness* was developed to introduce participants to various experiences and issues that are crystallizing in American society and particularly with the growing Muslim communities and strengthening of interfaith relationships. As societies around the world become increasingly religiously and culturally diverse, dialogue and cooperation has become a global necessity in order to achieve common goals in a mutually respectful manner. Authentic moderate religious education is critical and should be emphasized in the 21st century in order to inspire people to engage in collaborative efforts that positively impact every aspect of society, ranging from their community's most basic needs to political involvement.

The United States offers countless examples of the importance of both individual and collective success in the areas of interfaith, community, democracy and inclusiveness. It is only when everyone feels their voices are being heard and their

contributions are welcome, will you have the necessary elements for a sense of safety, a secure foundation and a future full of hope.

**Diversity in America** provided opportunities for delegation members to gain a deeper understanding about religious and cultural pluralism in America, experience the lives of Muslims in America, and witness the contributions of Muslim-Americans to the larger society. The program also enabled delegates to:

- Explore the history, growth and importance of interfaith initiatives in the U.S.
- Actively participate in events with religious leaders and communities from diverse backgrounds and faith traditions
- Engage in face-to-face dialogue with members of society through meetings, seminars, home visits, interfaith events, conferences and other activities
- Examine religious freedom and discover how it can play such a prominent role in the separation of church and state
- Observe the process of democracy and the political participation of Americans in the U.S. presidential election process

### 2016 - IOP Egypt Journey

The **2016 International Observer Program (IOP)** uniquely combined a group of nine men and women from the Muslim and Coptic communities in Egypt. The delegates serve as religious and community leaders, junior faculty members, and professionals in Egypt working at various prestigious Egyptian institutions such as Al-Azhar University, Cairo University, and the Coptic Museum of Art.

#### IOP Delegates

Mostafa Mahdy  
Hagar Alaa Abbass  
Azza Ramadan  
Ahmed Dabash  
Pastor John Naeem  
Gehan Azmy  
Ibrahim Alsadany  
Bouthina Gharieb Ebaid  
Boulos Magdy

The delegates' journey to the United States 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 and interaction with people of many different faith and cultural traditions. It challenged their preconceptions 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.

As their country and the Islamic world continue to be 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 prepared them to advocate for the needs of everyone in their society and new paradigms in their own communities. It also provided them with the much-needed opportunity of learning how to communicate and engage in dialogue with American people from various segments of the society.





The day after their arrival to the United States, the delegates received a two-day orientation with Imam Mohamad Bashar Arafat and Father Bill Au, Pastor of the Shrine of the Sacred Heart. During the orientation, the delegates were given an overview of CECF's activities, learned about the history and progress of interfaith in the United States, and discussed the importance of cultural diversity programs for clergy in the Abrahamic faiths. The orientation also enabled the delegates to witness the successful working relationship and friendship between a Muslim imam and Catholic priest.

## 2016 PROGRAM AT-A-GLANCE

### **10/30 – 11/02 (MD)**

- Program Orientation
- Baltimore City Police Department
- Al-Rahmah Islamic School

### **11/02 (DE)**

- St. Andrew's Episcopal Boarding School

### **11/03 – 11/05 (NY)**

- St. John the Divine & the Episcopal Diocese of New York
- United Nations Population Fund
- Islamic Cultural Center of New York
- WISE

### **11/06 – 11/07 (MD)**

- Baltimore Basilica
- Muslim Community Cultural Center
- Home Visit with Egyptian Family
- Muslim Community Center & Medical Clinic
- Montgomery County Faith Working Group

### **11/08 – 11/11 (DC)**

- Horace Mann Elementary School Polling Station
- Supreme Court
- U.S. Department of State
- U.S. Congress
- USIP
- Georgetown University
- Catholic University of America
- Pew Research Center
- Al Basheer Seminary & Islamic Society of Washington Area
- National U.S. – Arab Chamber of Commerce

### **11/10 (MD)**

- Islamic Education Center

### **11/11 (VA)**

- All Dulles Area Muslim Society Center

This final report highlights a few key events that epitomize their journey while traveling in America. The following selected events, organized by their related theme (interfaith, community, democracy and inclusiveness), show a foundation of new experiences from which these scholars are able to apply to their personal, spiritual and professional lives in Egypt.

## Diversity in America: **Interfaith**, Community, Democracy and Inclusiveness

### Cathedral of St. John the Divine

Visiting the *Cathedral of St. John the Divine*, located in the Morningside Heights neighborhood of New York City, was one of the most important visits for increasing the delegates' exposure and awareness of the many interfaith initiatives developed in the United States. The delegates received a private guided tour of the 19<sup>th</sup> century Gothic-Revival cathedral and learned about how people from many faiths and communities worship together in services held more than 30 times a week. Visiting the Cathedral of St. John the Divine, arguably the world's largest Anglican church, also marked the first time many of our Muslim delegates had entered a church and were able to closely observe the liturgical influences on the art and architecture of the sanctuary.



After touring the cathedral, the delegates were ushered into the private parish conference room where they were met by Rev. Father Masud, Episcopal minister and Founder of *Roots & Branches: Programs for Spiritual Growth*. Included in the panel discussion were Bishop Dietsche of the New York Episcopal Diocese and members of the New York Episcopal Muslim-Christian Relations Committee. Bishop Dietsche established the inclusive tone for the meeting by beginning with the statement, "We are all people of God," and emphasized the dire need for all of us to go beyond the misrepresentations of Muslim-Christian relationships in the media. Bishop Dietsche added that it is important to eliminate fear and prejudices about the 'other' through respect for the other's faith and in finding a common life together. "Through this," he remarked, "We learn the truth of each other and treasure the differences." The meeting also centered on the activities of the Muslim-Christian Relations Committee in churches and mosques, and addressed the ways in which one can successfully hold an interfaith dialogue.



The delegates engaged in a lengthy discussion with the panelists

on the implementation of interfaith programs and committees, as well as the church's role. One delegate expressed his delight in hearing about the success the Episcopal Diocese of New York has had in the development of interfaith relationships and related programs. He had thought cooperation and dialogue between people of different faith traditions were merely ideas – something to strive for but perhaps unattainable. Instead, he left the meeting convinced that these ideas could be actualized.

Each delegate also received a unity scarf from the Episcopal Diocese of New York, which they can wear to represent all three Abrahamic faiths.

## WISE

On their second day in New York, the delegates were given the opportunity to meet with the influential founder of the ***Women's Islamic Initiatives in Spirituality and Equality*** (WISE) and the Executive Director of the American Society for Muslim Advancement (ASMA), Daisy Khan. Daisy Khan has created a number of important intra- and interfaith programs and has led numerous interfaith events, such as the Cordoba Bread Fest Banquet. To strengthen the collective voices of Muslim women, she created WISE

and through WISE, develops ways to eradicate misunderstandings about Islam in America and the West. Echoing the sentiments of the leaders at the Episcopal Diocese of New York, Ms. Khan shared with the delegates the importance of ***Relationship Building*** with people from other faiths and noted that something as simple as sharing food - fulfilling a common, human need - can be used as a catalyst for change and dialogue.

Ms. Khan gave the delegates practical ideas for increasing ***Interfaith Awareness*** and relationships in Egypt such as: posting positive messages on social media, publishing a book, creating a website, holding interfaith gatherings, and having their very own Bread Fest. Daisy emphasized that hearts and minds only change at the emotional level and that this is key in their work as future interfaith advocates.

The delegates were delighted to meet with Daisy Khan and felt that it was a very important meeting to their work in Egypt. They felt they had benefited a great deal from hearing about her various initiatives and from the many handouts and brochures they received on handling misconceptions on Islam. The delegates very much respected the success of her interfaith programs and felt inspired by her passionate leadership.





## Montgomery County Interfaith Working Group

Visiting with the *Montgomery County Interfaith Working Group* headed by Rev. Mansfield Kaseman enhanced the conversation on establishing successful interfaith programs started by leaders of the Episcopal Diocese of New York and with Daisy Khan at WISE. The discussion was led by Rev. Kaseman, a revered leader and advocate in the fields of interfaith, civil rights and social justice in the United States, and was joined by Rev. Carol Flett and Montgomery County Interfaith Working Group member and Egyptian-American, Mimi Hassenien.



Rev. Kaseman remarked on the importance of volunteerism and ways in which one can establish a successful interfaith dialogue through focusing on common needs, staying away from religious doctrine, and relating to each other in a more personal way. The delegates were given helpful brochures and handouts ranging from a list of guidelines for interfaith dialogues to a how-to-guide for faith-based communities in helping immigrants in their communities.

Diversity in America: Interfaith, **Community**, Democracy and Inclusiveness

## Baltimore City Police Department

On their third day in the United States, the delegates received a warm welcome at the *Baltimore City Police Department (BCPD)* where they met with Major Steven Ward, Officer Robert Horne (an African American who converted to Islam in the mid '90s), Liaison to the Muslim Community in Baltimore, and Ms. Lyn Twyman from the Community Collaboration Division. Throughout the meeting, the delegates learned about the various programs and initiatives the BCPD has undertaken to improve community relations since the 2015 Baltimore City riots. Major Ward focused his presentation on the importance of listening to members of the community to better address their needs and eliminate barriers between the police force and community. Programs such as Hot Chocolate with a Cop, Read and Greet (with a police officer), and Portable Movie Nights all began to help grow stronger relationships with the Baltimore community. The highlight of Major Ward's presentation was learning about the 130 clergy who volunteer with the BCPD and make themselves available to go out on calls with the police force.



In addition to learning about the educational and career training programs for Baltimore's youth with Ms. Lyn Twyman, the delegates also learned about the outreach the BCPD conducts to the local Muslim community through Officer Robert Horne. Officer Horne, who spoke partly in Arabic in the meeting, discussed the need to build a relationship with Al-Azhar University, which, he remarked, was the voice of Islamic moderation in the world and would help in eradicating



extremism. Officer Horne works with Muslim prisoners and coordinates a Friday prayer service for them. He also works with newly released Muslim prisoners, helping them with the reintegration process and assisting them with finding employment.

The delegates agreed with Officer Horne’s thoughts on the importance of developing a stronger relationship with Al-Azhar and expressed how impressed they were by the amount of community outreach work the BCPD manages, as well as the level of creativity evident in their community development programs and activities.



### Muslim Community Center and Medical Clinic

CECF arranged for the delegation to visit and tour the **Muslim Community Center (MCC)** in Silver Spring, Maryland and the **Muslim Community Center’s Medical Clinic**. The MCC community is one of the most active and successful volunteer-led communities in the state of Maryland. MCC serves 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. MCC offers a number of programs such as their Weekend School for Islamic learning, Arabic and English language programs, and Community Education Series supporting the community in their identities as Muslim-Americans.

After their tour of MCC, the delegates had the chance to explore the facility of the MCC Medical Clinic. The MCC Medical Clinic’s mission is to provide compassionate, high-quality, and free medical care to uninsured adult residents of the Silver Spring, Maryland community. These services are provided by an assembled group of volunteer physicians and staff. Visiting MCC and MCC Medical Clinic allowed the delegates to witness the impact of volunteerism and community outreach in the United States.





## Dinner with Mimi and Magdy Hassenien

The home visit with *Mimi and Magdy Hassenien* was one of the most interesting events for the delegates. The Hasseniens' story is just one example of how an Arab-American family of Egyptian origin, who settled in the U.S. more than 35 years ago, has been able to make a success of their lives in the United States. The Hasseniens have not only been successful in business, but also in philanthropy in the influential and prosperous Montgomery County of Maryland. Mrs. Hassenien herself is very involved politically and started a successful school and childcare center.

The Hasseniens' story is a classic tale of an immigrant family coming to America with little to no money, but as a result of hard work and determination, were able to make a success of their lives. Mr. Hassenien emphasized the importance of hard work in the United States and how a person with the right work ethic can achieve his dreams and financial goals. This, he said, is what sets America apart from other countries and makes it unique. Mrs. Hassenien discussed the difficulty she and her husband faced when they migrated to the U.S. At that time, Americans had little exposure to Muslim or Arab culture, but her family decided to work hard to be heard and respected as citizens, and soon found their way into American society.

The delegates were amazed with her leadership and inspired by her success as a fellow Egyptian. One of the delegates mentioned that their IOP experience would definitely have been missing an important component if they had not had the opportunity to visit with the Hasseniens and listen to their personal experiences in the U.S.



## Diversity in America: Interfaith, Community, **Democracy** and Inclusiveness

### Horace-Mann Elementary School Polling Station

This year's delegates had the fortuitous experience of witnessing the 2016 U.S. presidential elections and observing American democracy in action. CECF was able to obtain permission by the D.C. Board of Elections for the delegates to serve as election observers at the *Horace-Mann Elementary School polling station* in Washington, D.C.

The delegates were greeted by the head volunteer and shown to a separate area where they were given observer badges and could see the voting process clearly. The delegates noted the long line of people and how each person was given the option of voting on paper or electronically. They also observed the special modifications that were available for the disabled and elderly such as the ability to vote curbside with the help of a polling station volunteer! The delegates were impressed by those



who were volunteering to help with the process and by the level of privacy and organization the U.S. election system offers to voters.

The delegates were given ample opportunity to talk with volunteers and ask questions about the process. Before they departed, they were each given an “I voted” sticker and were able to ask questions to American voters standing in line outside of the facility.



## U.S. Supreme Court

The *U.S. Supreme Court* is one of the most important visits the delegates will make during the Washington, D.C. portion of the program as the court represents the protection of freedom, individual rights, and democracy in the United States. After many years of working with the Supreme Court, CECF was able to coordinate a private briefing with the Supreme Court Fellow for the delegates in the private lounge of the justices. The delegates were very interested, particularly those with an academic background in Islamic jurisprudence, 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.



During their tour of the main courtroom, the guide pointed out the marble friezes sculpted on all four walls of the courtroom. The sculptor created a procession of great lawgivers of history ranging from Moses to Confucius. What was most interesting for the delegates was the inclusion of the Prophet of Muhammad, PBUH\*. The Prophet, PBUH\* is depicted holding the Qur'an, which is the primary source of Islamic Law. The figure was intended to honor the Prophet, PBUH\* and his wisdom. In addition to the Prophet, PBUH\* King Menes of ancient Egypt is also depicted. The delegates felt proud to see Egypt and Islam represented in the highest court of the United States.

\*Peace be upon him.



## U.S. Department of State

The meeting at the *U.S. Department of State* with the Special Representative of Muslim Communities, Shaarik Zafar, and colleagues from the Office of Religion and Global Affairs, was an amazing opportunity for our delegates to meet an important Muslim government official and see how Muslim-Americans thrive in a number of different offices, sectors, and professions in the United States. Mr. Zafar provided the delegates with an overview of the work of his office emphasizing his role in increasing understanding of Islam in America and working towards the protection of Muslim minorities worldwide. As a Department of State official, Mr. Zafar noted the importance of his office in working towards the promotion of greater ties in the world and increasing cooperation.



The delegates engaged in discussion with Mr. Zafar on the importance and benefits of an exchange program like CECF's *International Observers Program*, and how exchange programs can help to increase collaboration and partnership between the U.S. and other countries – in particular, Egypt. The delegates agreed with Mr. Zafar that it is important that their experience be shared with a wider audience upon their return to Egypt. Several delegates expressed their gratitude for being part of the IOP and how much their perspective and thoughts have changed, in a positive way, throughout their trip.



The delegates were impressed by the professional and diplomatic nature of the Department of State and the Special Representative to Muslim Communities and greatly appreciated the hospitality they received.



## Diversity in America: Interfaith, Community, Democracy and **Inclusiveness**

### St. Andrew's School

Visiting *St. Andrew's Episcopal Boarding School* in Middletown, Delaware was one of the highlights of this year's program. The evidence of St. Andrew's commitment to excellence could be found all around: from the beautiful landscape and English architecture to the high standards the school holds in academics, athletics, and behavior for its diverse student body. The school prides itself on its commitment to creating and maintaining a more diverse and inclusive community among its faculty and students, and offers many of its students substantial financial support.





Upon arrival, the delegates received a warm welcome by Headmaster, Daniel Roach and Chaplin, Rev. Jay Hutchinson and were given a tour of the campus by one of their top students, Nour, who also happens to be Egyptian. The delegates were given ample opportunity to ask Nour questions about her experience at an American boarding school and how her schooling in the U.S. differs from her experience in the Middle East. In the afternoon, the delegates observed classes in the Department of World Religions and noted that the teaching method employed was more student-centered and followed a Socratic approach. They also saw evidence of project-based learning in the assignments. Some of the delegates who hold teaching positions in Egyptian universities later expressed their interest in understanding how they could employ the same teaching techniques with their students. They felt that Egypt is suffering from rote memorization and a lack of critical thinking skills.

Throughout the remainder of the evening, the delegates continued to receive 5-star treatment by their hosts. After attending afternoon classes, they participated in a private discussion with selected faculty and ethnically diverse students who were quite interested in learning more about Egypt from the delegates. The delegates attended dinner and were each given a student host to sit with and engage in conversation with others at their table. At dessert, delegate Mostafa Mahdy delivered an exceptional address to the present students and faculty, which was well received and applauded by the St. Andrew's community. After thanking St. Andrew's for their hospitality, Mostafa made the following remarks:

*"Before I came to America, I thought that interfaith dialogue is mere propaganda but after three days in America, I found in places we visited that interfaith dialogue is real."*

*Before coming, I thought of Muslims in America as a minority who lived in a separate community, but I found after three days of visiting, that they are an integral part of the society. They participate in all aspects of life - economically, socially and politically."*

The remainder of the evening was spent attending the weekly chapel service and a private reception, which allowed the delegates to continue mingling and connecting with students and faculty.

The delegates expressed their sincerest gratitude to CECF for organizing this special visit for them. They were extremely impressed by what they saw on the campus and how they were treated, and felt inspired to employ some of the teaching techniques



they witnessed in the classes. It was truly a special and joyous day.

## ADAMS Center

The *All Dulles Area Muslim Society (ADAMS)* Center plays an important role in the Sterling, Virginia community as it provides the local Muslim community, both Shi'a and Sunni, a space to pray and worship at either its main branch or one of its satellite locations. ADAMS is the second largest mosque in the United States and organizes a variety of educational and social activities that provide wonderful opportunities to learn and grow. The ADAMS Center also believes in interfaith collaboration and hosts and participates in several interdenominational programs and activities throughout the Washington, D.C. metropolitan area.

The delegates were able to attend Jum'ah prayer on Friday after the U.S. presidential election. Both Muslim and Christian delegates were impressed by the message of unity, inclusiveness and hope delivered by Imam Rafaa. They heard Imam Rafaa directly address the fears of his Muslim community in light of the election results, upsetting rhetoric, and increase in crimes against Muslims as depicted in the media. The delegates also heard remarks from a representative from the Republican Party in Virginia who spoke to the congregation's concerns and offered them solace and support. The representative wanted the congregation to know that their rights as U.S. citizens would continue to be protected going forward.

Imam Rafaa spoke with the delegates over a catered lunch about their local interfaith efforts, how the mosque promotes inclusivity and democracy in its work, as well as the history of interfaith activities in the Middle East going back to the time of the Prophet, PBUH\*. In the reflection session following the visit, several of the delegates remarked on how impressed they were with the organization of ADAMS and how the mosque represents certain ideals found in America: democracy, inclusivity, and gender equality.

\*Peace be upon him.

## Islamic Educational Center

The *Islamic Educational Center (IEC)* is a prominent Shi'a mosque located in Potomac, Maryland and provides prayer services for both Shi'a and Sunni Muslims. The delegates were able to visit the mosque and meet with Imam Rasoul Naghavi Nia, a Georgetown University Ph.D. scholar who serves as the IEC Imam and at other mosques. The delegates were given a tour of the school where students student the





Qu'ran on the weekends and were invited to attend evening prayer with the IEC community, of which several accepted. As a show of respect, Imam Rasoul asked Imam Arafat to lead the congregation of the Shi'a community for Isha, the evening prayer. Imam Rasoul generously gave of his time and spoke with the delegates about his vision for IEC, the challenges that the community has faced, and his passion for creating more opportunities for bringing together Shi'a and Sunni Muslims at the center.

Visiting IEC was the first time our Muslim delegates entered a Shi'a mosque and met with a Shi'a Imam. This was an important experience for them – one they will bring back to Egypt and certainly influence their work and relationships with the Egyptian Shi'a community going forward.



## U.S. International Development Work in Interfaith, Community, Democracy and Inclusiveness

### United Nations Population Fund

Most of the scheduled visits for the IOP delegates focused on the aims of the program to illustrate how America's mosques, churches, NGO's, and governmental and academic institutions promote and demonstrate a commitment towards interfaith, community, democracy and inclusiveness in the United States. But there were other visits made to equally important institutions – the United Nations Population Fund, Georgetown University, United States Institute of Peace– that are achieving similar goals, but on a global level.



At the *United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA)*, located several blocks away from the United Nations headquarters in Manhattan, CECF arranged a meeting for the delegates to meet with Senior UN advisor and fellow Egyptian, Dr. Azza Karam, along with several of her colleagues from the UN Alliance of Civilizations, Security Council Counter Terrorism Executive Directorate, UNESCO, UN Women and the UN Office for Genocide Prevention and Responsibility to Protect. During the meeting, each UN representative spoke at great length about the programs their offices were conducting, particularly as it pertains to Egypt and the MENA region. Dr. Karam and her colleagues emphasized the important role religion plays in maintaining peace, advocating for women's rights, and countering terrorism and racism. They discussed the importance of engaging local clergy, religious actors, and faith-based institutions in their work.



The delegates felt that the meeting was extremely informative and beneficial, and they expressed in a later reflection session how they wished they had more time with them. They have a great deal of respect for Dr. Karam and her work in the area of reproductive and gender rights. Dr. Karam and her colleagues also graciously offered their contact information for our delegates in order to continue working with them in the future.



## Georgetown University

During the Washington, D.C. portion of the trip and the day after the presidential elections, CECF organized a half-day conference at the ***Center for Muslim-Christian Understanding at Georgetown University*** with the help of Georgetown's Muslim Chaplain, Imam Yahya Hendi. The focus of the conference was on Islamic Religious Education in the Arab World and the panel discussion included Dr. Yvonne Haddad, Professor of the History of Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations, Dr. Paul Heck, Professor of Islamic Studies, Imam Hendi, Imam Bashar of CECF, and IOP delegate Ibrahim Al Saadany. The Georgetown professors spoke about their experience in training Muslim clergy in the Middle East and their experience of being non-Muslim teachers of Islam at Georgetown. Imam Hendi and Imam Bashar spoke about their personal experience as imams-in-training in the Arab World and what they felt had been missing from their experience. The delegates grappled with the idea of non-Muslim teachers teaching Islam and what may be gained or missed in their instruction when this happens.



Other important ideas from the discussion included:

- Islam and Christianity have more in common than what is taught in religious training programs
- Religious clergy who are taught to refute other religions is problematic
- Urgent need for seminaries to focus on the spirituality of religion as much as the doctrine or science of religion
- Religion can provide a foundation for intercultural exchange and a bridge for ***Public Diplomacy***

After the discussion, Imam Hendi invited the delegates to attend an informal interfaith gathering with Georgetown students in response to the U.S. presidential election results. The delegates were able to observe the deep emotional impact the election results had on this particular segment of the population; for instance, they saw students holding each other and sobbing. The interfaith chaplain leaders prayed for reconciliation and the future of the country.



Following the gathering, the delegates were invited to eat at Georgetown's Faculty Club and debriefed with Imam Hendi on what they experienced that day. Imam Hendi also offered guidance and support to those delegates interested in pursuing an academic career in interfaith studies in the U.S.

## United States Institute of Peace

On the third day of the Washington, D.C. program, CECF arranged a special visit to the ***United States Institute of Peace (USIP)*** through Susan Hayward, Director of Religion and Inclusive Societies at USIP. Ms. Hayward's office organized a working lunch in one of the private conference rooms to discuss the various initiatives and programs USIP has been and is conducting in the field of ***Peacebuilding***. For example, the delegates learned about USIP's peace curricula for religious institutions, which involves teaching peace from a religious lens. Following the discussion with various USIP program officers, the delegates watched the film, *Imam and the Pastor*, and discussed its relevance in using religion as resource to help alleviate conflict in the world.



In response to questions from the delegates on how to start an interfaith dialogue, the program officers emphasized the importance of first, starting a relationship with a clergy member from the other faith or finding a 'counterpart' and then engaging each other's communities in a project that helps both sides. Working together builds trust and confidence in one another, which leads to friendship and greater understanding.



The delegates were pleased to have left the meeting with USIP with practical ideas on how to begin working interfaith relationships in their communities in Egypt.

## Educational and Entertaining Excursions in New York and Washington, D.C.

Interspersed throughout their two weeks of meetings were half and full day sightseeing excursions in New York City and Washington, D.C. Providing time for the delegates to explore each city's offerings and streets enabled them to experience first-hand the diversity of America's citizens, its pluralistic nature, and pieces of its history.

In New York, the delegates ate from halal food carts - meeting the Pakistani and Egyptian men who service them – and walked through Times Square at night witnessing the melting pot of people who visit from all over the world as well as those from a variety of cultural, ethnic and religious backgrounds who claim New York as their home. CECF arranged for the delegates to visit the Metropolitan Museum of Art and were given a private tour of the Egyptian art collection. The delegates were also given a Circle Line Tour of the city's key sightseeing attractions by boat and took pictures by the Statue of Liberty.



In Washington, DC, the delegates walked down the Washington Mall, took photos next to the Capitol Building, and were given their choice to visit any number of free museums the city has to offer. Many toured the Museum of Natural History, the Air and Space Museum, and experienced the Qu'ran Exhibit at the Sackler Freer Gallery.







## Reflections and Insights on the Impact of the 2016 - IOP

Throughout the delegates' two-week trip, CECF had organized time for reflection sessions. The reflection sessions were a chance for the delegates to reflect and debrief on their IOP experiences and would take place either in the morning or evening after the meetings had concluded. On the day before their departure back to Egypt, CECF arranged for a 2.5 hour long reflection and evaluation session in which the delegates were able to share with CECF their thoughts, ideas, comments, and concerns from their IOP experience and also to discuss their next steps for Egypt.

The delegates expressed to CECF how much their perspective of the United States had shifted over the course of the program. They were pleasantly surprised to find the American people kind and friendly and admired how people from other faiths and minority groups are included and accepted here. One delegate mentioned how she had worried at the airport about the problems she might face coming here as a Muslim. She was concerned that she might be the target of Islamophobia. Much to her relief and surprise, she felt she had been treated very well and that she fit right in.

There were many other important insights shared over the course of the program, including:

- ❖ It is important to visit different places of worship in order to enhance understanding and develop relationships with other faiths.
- ❖ Al-Azhar at one time in history had been open to Jewish and Christian scholars. This is not the case anymore, but this should change.
- ❖ The practical application of principals such as love, forgiveness, etc. can be applied in Egyptian society by teaching these principals in school and religious curriculum, at mass, and in Friday prayer.
- ❖ It is important that imams help their congregation to learn the context of the Qu'ran and its verses.
- ❖ That through observing the friendship and respect between Imam Bashar and his Christian counterpart, Father Bill Au, interfaith collaboration is possible if it is built on trust, friendship and a shared vision.
- ❖ It is important to listen to understand, not only to defend.
- ❖ Interfaith exists and is alive in America. So many faiths and minorities live in love and cooperation here. This experience could and should be shared with others.
- ❖ Americans also need to benefit from learning from Muslims what Islam says about racism, other faiths, etc. America needs to understand that Islam is a religion of peace.

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 **2016 International Observer Program**.



They have had the benefit of experiencing the practice of Islam in America in a very diverse and 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.

*CECF would like to thank the U.S. Embassy – Cairo for its continual support of the **International Observers Program** without which would not be possible. The IOP and programs like it seek to develop understanding and improve perspectives thereby preventing conflicts and alleviating unnecessary tension between people of varying backgrounds. CECF appreciates and is proud that exchange programs play an important part in achieving the United States' goals of improving and strengthening relationships among cultures and nations.*

